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BY

HENRY ERROLL

AUTHOR OF 'AN UGLY DUCKLING,' 'THE ACADEMICIAN,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. III

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CHAPTER XXVII

LAUGHED AT

GEORGE'S play progressed steadily. As it grew nearer to completion Mrs. Fellowes took more and more interest in it, suggesting improvements, correcting the mistakes George was so afraid of making, and listening with indefatigable patience to the reading and re-reading of each scene. George was very often in Cavendish Square, as often as he could make sufficient reason for going there. He went not only

on account of his play, although that was always the pretext, and was made to serve in the most ingenious manner. He had other reasons for wishing to be near Helen—he had fallen in love with her.

For the first time in his life he was really and truly in love, for he dignified by that name the unlawful feeling which he had allowed to grow up in his breast for another man's wife. He had not Vernon's excuse—Helen had been a wife when he first knew her. Nor had she given him any encouragement; she had been kind to him, interested in him, and desirous, in her position of manager's wife, of getting a good play for her husband's theatre, but nothing further. She had always kept him at a proper distance, a by no means easy task, for George, with his really slight knowledge of women, and more especially of gentle-

women, was inclined to be almost brutally direct in his expressions of admiration. Helen had not taken offence at his sometimes rather annoying familiarity ; she knew him to be of an emotional, artistic temperament, and she had come into contact with too many of these not to be aware that a good deal of allowance must be made for them ; and then she could see for herself that he had not been accustomed to the society of ladies, and did not know exactly how they should be treated. When George sat down quite close to her she moved her chair back ; when he stared sentimentally at her she changed her position ; and lastly, when he grew romantic in his conversation she had a quiet way of turning the subject, which she had hitherto found completely efficacious. If George had known how little place he held in her thoughts he

would really have been surprised. Helen's mind was engrossed with her own cares, her daily struggle; George L'Estrange and his poetic feelings were nothing to her. She laughed when he brought her a copy of ecstatic verses, which he had sat up all night to write, and which he secretly considered especially happy.

'Verses to me! How flattering!' she cried, and her husband happening to come in just at that moment, she said to him,

'Look, Jim, Mr. L'Estrange has actually written some verses in my honour! Come here, and I'll read them to you. What—you would rather not?' as George made a step forward and a hasty gesture. 'Oh, you mustn't be shy! An author always likes to hear his things read.'

And she forthwith proceeded to read them aloud, Mr. Fellowes standing gravely

listening, and George absolutely livid with suppressed annoyance.

‘Rather too ethereal for so very substantial a being as myself, don’t you think?’ she said when she had finished, still in that tone of delicate mockery which always so disconcerted George. ‘But really they are very pretty. I shall show them to everybody. You ought to write a book of poems, Mr. L’Estrange.’

George had not brought her any more verses.

He had thought about her more and more, however. She came between him and his work, he allowed the idea of her to absorb him utterly. At first he was content to feed upon his own feeling, but soon this did not suffice him. He began to want to know whether she cared for him. She was perfectly Sphinx-like to him, he

was aware he did not in the least understand her, and upon this want of comprehension he chose to base his hopes. Her seeming coolness might be simply a veil, which a few words from him would cause to disappear. Some women were like that; the more they cared, the less they threw themselves at one's head. She gave him so much of her time, she had taken so much pains about his play, were not these good signs? He was sure she did not love Vernon, as sure as he was that she did not love her husband. There must therefore be a vacant place in her heart—why should he not fill it?—what if he already filled it? Perhaps only a word from him was wanted to awaken a love which was lying dormant, all unsuspected by her. Full of these thoughts, he came and went, bold only when away from her, timid the instant he

entered her presence. And all the time she was taken up with her own concerns, and never even heard half his sighs and smothered exclamations.

At last the finishing touch was given to the play. George was to take it to Cavendish Square, and there read it from beginning to end to James Fellowes and his wife. Helen had arranged it so, overruling her husband, who would have preferred the manuscript all to himself.

Full of anxiety, worn out by want of sleep, George arrived at the proper hour. Mr. Fellowes received him kindly but seriously. Business was business with him, and he was not going to allow his judgment to be biased because this young fellow was a protégé of Vernon's and Helen's. He was inclined to be critical, and by no means expected great things. As George read,

however, the manager's face brightened : he listened with the greatest attention, but without making a sound or a gesture during the whole of the three acts. When the last word was read all he said was,

‘I think there is something to be done with it. Lend it me, I should like to look it over by myself.’

He took the manuscript and went away, leaving George uncertain whether he were pleased or not. Mrs. Fellowes said encouragingly,

‘That’s all right ! I’m sure Jim will take it. How well it went !’

‘Do you really think so ?’ asked George despondently.

‘Really and truly. Of course my husband can’t jump at it, but I know him better than you do, and I could see almost from the first that he was surprised.’

She leaned back in her chair, smiling kindly up at him as he stood before her. At sight of that smile George forgot all about his play; he remained transfixed, gazing at her with passionate eyes. Suddenly he knelt down, seized the hand that hung over the side of her chair and pressed it fervently to his lips.

‘How beautiful you are!’ he murmured.

Helen tried to draw away her hand, but he held it fast.

‘Get up, Mr. L’Estrange, you forget yourself!’ she said haughtily.

‘No, no,’ George said, still in the same impassioned tone, ‘do not send me away. Be kind, be good to me, my life, my Queen!’

‘How dare you speak to me so?’ cried Helen with flashing eyes. ‘You must be mad! Let go my hand—let it go, I say!’

George kissed her hand again, and

relinquished it. Helen started up to leave the room, but he stood before her.

‘Hear me, only hear me!’ he pleaded.

‘I have nothing to hear from you!’ said Helen. ‘Let me pass instantly.’

‘Not before I have told you how I love you! How I have given myself all to you—how you are all I live for!’

Helen suddenly felt that the situation was supremely ludicrous. She would not pay George the compliment of taking him seriously. She sat down again and laughed.

‘Is this out of another play?’ she said quietly. ‘It sounds very familiar!’

‘You are always ready to laugh at me,’ George said sadly. ‘You do not know how you hurt me.’

She made no answer, but only looked at him with calm contempt. He burst out,

‘And yet I believe you love me, too! I believe that we were made for each other!’

‘If you were to take one moment for reflection, Mr. L’Estrange,’ observed Helen very coldly, ‘you would perhaps realise how very foolishly you are talking. Another word, and I shall be forced to forbid you my house. I ought to do so as it is, but I see you are excited, and I can make allowances so far. But don’t go any further, pray.’

‘Do you mean you will not listen to me?’ cried George passionately.

‘Hush, hush, you are not well,’ said Helen soothingly. ‘Go away now. You will be so sorry for this folly to-morrow.’

She rose, and this time George did not attempt to bar her passage. He stood looking blankly at her.

‘Go home!’ she said, and she smiled, although her cheeks had grown pale. ‘Go home, and come back wiser. I understand how excited you are about your play, but you mustn’t be foolish, you know.’

With a kindly nod she was gone, leaving George to let himself out. He stood rooted to the spot, a rushing as of great waters in his ears, a curious tightening at his heart which made him put his hand to his side. He was conscious that a wave of icy-cold contempt had swept over his head. She did not even think him worth her anger! As in a dream he listened to the faint rustle of her dress as she went away, until it was drowned in a hoarse street-cry outside. There he stood, a revolution going on within him. His veneer of gentility fell from him in that moment, he muttered beneath his breath coarse epithets such as the colliers

of his native county are wont to use to their womenkind—or their dogs. He clenched his fist and shook it at the door, then quickly put his hand to his forehead which was damp with perspiration, as a pain shot through it which almost blinded him for the instant.

A door shutting in the distance recalled him to himself. He started, gazed round vacantly as if in search of something, glared at the chair in which Helen had been sitting, and with another muttered curse turned on his heel and went from the room.





CHAPTER XXVIII

SHADOWS

PRUE was sitting all by herself in the garden. She was very dull; Gwen had gone out, she was tired of teasing Ben, of playing with her dog, of reading. She felt melancholy, too. No one had been to see them for the last few days, and Prue, although she pretended, when it suited her, that people bored her, was an eminently sociable being. Gwendoline was so dreadfully dejected, besides, that her sombre spirits could not but

react in some measure upon her little sister.

Gwen had always, ever since Prue could remember, been subject to periodical fits of depression, but they had never been so frequent nor so dismal as of late. The little girl's childhood had been clouded by what she had been taught by her old nurse to call 'Gwen's tantrums,' she had always lived in that unequable atmosphere which is so bad for the young. Nor had this unnatural condition failed to produce the usual results. Accustomed to see her sister give way to the feeling which happened to be uppermost at the moment, Prue had learned to do the same thing, and to impose on others the ill-temper, the boisterous gaiety, or the querulousness, which alternately invaded her. Keenly alive to her deformity she had never been able to trust any

one's affection but Gwen's; and Gwen she loved in an utter, intense, tragic way, that was almost painful at times. When she thought, as she often did, for she was a person addicted to melancholy musings, that Gwen might die and leave her alone, alone in a cruel world full of 'straight' people, the idea was overwhelming—she could not bear to dwell on it long, and yet her poor morbid mind returned to it over and over again. She began to think of it this afternoon as she sat curled up on the root of an old apple tree, looking like some antediluvian creature, with her twisted form and bright lizard-eyes.

If Gwen should die! She pictured to herself Gwen's pretty white bedroom upstairs with closed blinds and shutters, Gwen's opera-cloak flung on a chair, Gwen's little shoes standing by the dressing-

table, some faded flowers in a glass, and on the bed—Gwen herself, lying dead! She would have cast herself upon the bed—they would have tried to shut her out, but no one could keep her from Gwen—she would be lying with Gwen on the bed, Gwen dead and she alive! That was so dreadfully cruel, that she would be left alive! But she could kill herself, of course. How would she do it? Could one hold one's breath until one died, she wondered? She did not think she would have the courage to stab herself, it would hurt so, it made her shudder to think of it. There was poison, but how could one get poison? Besides, she had heard that if one did not take just enough, if one took too much or too little, one only suffered a good deal and did not die. That would never do, it would be so ignominious to try

and fail. She was doubtful, also, if it were possible to smother one's self, she had never heard of any one's doing that. No, the best way to do it would be what she had often resolved upon before—she would starve herself. She was not sure how many days it would take; if only two or three, then they could bury her with Gwen, but if longer, she would creep to Gwen's grave and die there, like some faithful dog. She had reached this point in her cheerful meditations when her sister came across the lawn to her.

‘Why, my Prue! what a long face! Has anything happened to the chickens?’

‘No,’ said Prue, trying to wink away unobserved the moisture in her eyes which her profound self-pity had called forth.

‘Then what are you looking so solemn about? Tell me, dear.’

She sat down by Prue and drew her sister to her.

‘Nothing. I was only thinking,’ said Prue, who had been so completely absorbed in her imaginings that she could not at once throw off their effect.

‘What were you thinking? You’re not unhappy, darling, are you?’

She pressed the dark head to her bosom, and her eyes sought the sky above, with an agonised entreaty in them. Anything to her—but oh, not to Prue!

Prue gave no answer, but after a moment Gwendoline felt a tremor pass through the ungainly little form. She turned Prue’s face so that she could see it. It was wet with tears.

‘What, Prue! Crying? Oh, my pet, tell me, what is it?’

‘Nothing, nothing,’ sobbed Prue, making

vigorous efforts to keep back the tears. 'I was only thinking—about—you.'

'About me, sweet? And that makes you cry?'

'Yes, because—I was thinking—I often do think—how awful it would be—if you—were to die—and—leave me!'

Gwendoline was silent for a minute. Had Prue then, too, thought of that? Had the same merciless ghost which so remorselessly visited *her* pillow come to her little sister's couch as well? How many times, in the quiet watches of the night, in the theatre, at rehearsal, at parties, in the midst of songs and laughter, had she thought of it? Was it not absolute torture, the knowledge that, as human probabilities went, Prue, who was strong and well in spite of her affliction, would outlive her, who was so many years older?

Her passionate, stubborn craving for Vernon's love was not all selfish. If what she had once dared to hope had come about, that haunting fear, that vision of the deformed girl, helpless, loveless, poverty-stricken, and alone, would have passed from her. But she had never imagined that the same idea had been present to Prue—her poor little Prue, whom she had tried so hard to guard, to save from pain and trouble.

‘My darling!’ she said presently, and though her tone was gay her voice was choked, ‘how can you think of such absurd things? Die—and leave you! Why, Prue, do I look as if I were going to die? I can assure you I feel very well!’

Prue gave a quick glance up into her sister's face, and then hid her own again.

‘Don't, Gwen, don't!’ she sobbed. ‘What

should I do—what would become of me?’

‘Come in with me, darling, and see what pretty flowers I have brought you,’ said Gwen tenderly, bending over her and trying to raise her. ‘Don’t let us think of what will not happen. I am not going to die.’

But Prue would not be comforted. She was crying hysterically.

‘Promise—promise, Gwen, promise you’ll never go away from me like that!’

‘My precious, I promise!’ said Gwen. ‘Look, here is Ben coming, I expect some one is there.’

Prue darted up, and disappeared behind some shrubs, where her sister, having dismissed Ben, found her drying her eyes a moment later.

‘Come, dear,’ said Gwen, ‘Mr. L’Estrange

is in the drawing-room. Come and help me to amuse him, for I feel awfully stupid this afternoon.'

Thus appealed to, Prue followed her sister indoors, and went up to bathe her eyes, promising to join her directly.

It was a week since George had read his play to Mr. Fellowes. The manager had as yet given him no decisive answer, but George had seen him more than once at the theatre, and had gathered from his unaltered manner that his wife had kept her own counsel.

George had had a very bad week of it. Smarting with wounded self-pride, mortified to the very utmost, his feelings towards Helen had undergone the most complete revulsion. As much as he had loved her before, so much did he hate her now. He hated her for having repulsed him, for

not having returned his love, but most of all he hated her for having made light of that love. If she had maintained the same indignant tone she had taken at first, if she had stormed and ordered him out of the house, if she had told him he insulted her, he could have borne it better; but her cold, cutting contempt, her unruffled smile, her proud, almost amused eyes—the remembrance of these stung like the lash of a whip.

Mrs. Fellowes had certainly taken a most effectual way of crushing a love which ought never to have been offered her, but she had made an enemy for life. A woman may refuse a man, she may spurn him from her haughtily, indignantly, but she must not smile indulgently at him, and tell him soothingly that he is excited about his play. George felt he could never forgive Helen that. He had brooded

savagely over it all, pacing the floor of his small room until the man who lived below had sent up frantic messages to Mr. L'Estrange to 'stop that infernal row.' He had hated to go to the theatre at night; it seemed to him that everybody there, the very walls themselves, must know all about it, and be mocking at him behind his back. He longed to have power, to possess the means of humbling Helen, of bringing low that proud head, those fearless eyes. But he knew his time was not yet; it would come, sooner perhaps than people thought, and then——!

Unable to bear his own company any longer, he had sallied out this afternoon with the idea of passing a lively half-hour in Prue's society. He had walked over, and was hot and dusty when he came in, and glad to sit down in the cool, peaceful room.

Miss Maltravers came to him first. He was rather disappointed to find her at home ; it was Prue's piquant talk he wanted, not her elder sister's far more amiable, but slightly dull conversation.

The usual personalities about their fellow-actors were soon disposed of ; this one's ambition to get all the 'fat' of the piece to himself, the impertinence of another in introducing new 'business' with the view of getting a laugh from the 'gods,' the spitefulness of the stage-manager, the overweening conceit and jealousy of the actress next in importance to Miss Maltravers ; all these were discussed, as they had been so often discussed before. For Miss Maltravers they possessed an untiring interest, they were to her what horses are to a sporting man, women to a fast man, old maids' affairs to a curate. They had been

her daily food for so many years past, they had served to amuse Prue when she was quite little, they had lost none of their savour now. But to George these details seemed inanely tiresome; what did he care that Miss Howard had really red hair, and only dyed it that lovely golden-brown, or that Miss St. Vincent owed her dress-maker two hundred pounds, and was no better than she should be? He was full of George L'Estrange and his wrongs and injuries—what were hair-dyes or milliners' bills to him? He was thankful when at length Prue entered the room, which she did far more quietly than was her wont. She sat down near her sister, and for fully five minutes took no part in the conversation, except to answer in monosyllables any remarks specially addressed to her.

‘Have you seen Mr. Vernon lately?’ asked Miss Maltravers presently.

‘Not for more than a week,’ answered George. ‘The last time I saw him was at Mrs. Fellowes’s.’

‘Oh, of course!’ said Gwendoline with a sneer. ‘That’s where every one must go if they want to see Mr. Vernon. I wonder Mr. Fellowes stands it!’

‘Perhaps he can’t help it,’ said George.

‘Oh, nonsense! Why should he not be able to help it? Mrs. Fellowes is entirely dependent on him. I know for a fact that she had nothing when he married her—not even enough money to buy a wedding-gown with, I believe. If he were to get tired of her goings on she would find herself in a very bad hole.’

‘Perhaps Vernon would see to that,’ suggested George, a most unpleasant

expression coming into his handsome features.

‘It’s never safe to count upon that,’ answered Miss Maltravers, ‘forbidden fruit is so much more worth reaching after than fallen fruit.’

She laughed, and Prue and George joined in.

‘No, but really, do you think there is any reason for Mr. Fellowes to interfere?’ asked George.

‘I don’t know what you call “reason,”’ said Gwendoline carelessly. ‘She has compromised herself over and over again with Vernon, if that’s what you mean.’

‘Shocking!’ said George, with a shake of the head.

‘It’s disgusting!’ Miss Maltravers returned passionately. ‘Simply disgusting! There’s that woman whom Jim Fellowes

picks up goodness only knows where, and marries—actually marries, and gives her everything she wants and more, and not content with that, she must go and fasten upon as good a man as ever lived and make a fool of him as well.'

'She ought to be locked up!' said Prue viciously.

'It's a great pity!' observed George. 'Such a good fellow as her husband is too.'

'Do you think he doesn't notice?' asked Prue.

'I've a good mind to tell him!' said Miss Maltravers. 'It's a shame to see a man so tricked to his very face.'

'Why don't you?' said George. 'Some one ought to.'

'Oh, I couldn't really,' answered Gwendoline, who was in truth incapable of such an action; 'besides, it isn't my business.'

‘And Vernon would never speak to you again!’ thought George.

‘But there’s no excuse for her,’ continued Gwendoline; ‘for she got a great deal more than she deserved when Fellowes married her!’

‘She’s a beast, with her nasty patronising airs!’ said Prue hotly.

‘Oh, hush, dear!’ reproved Gwendoline, somewhat late in the day. ‘You mustn’t speak so. Don’t let’s talk about her any more. Amuse Mr. L’Estrange for a few minutes, while I go and take off my hat. Tell him about the chickens.’

She went, but Prue’s thoughts were far from chickens. As soon as her sister had shut the door she drew a little nearer to George, and said confidentially,

‘We agree with each other about Mrs. Fellowes, don’t we?’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ replied George.

‘You believe she’s very bad—just as bad as can be, don’t you?’ asked Prue.

‘Yes,’ George answered, and felt that the first stone of his revenge was laid. He did not believe it, he knew nothing about it, but he would believe it; anything to Helen’s discredit was good enough for him.

‘She’s made Gwen miserable,’ said Prue, drawing her brows together, ‘that’s what I really care about. But she shall be punished, never fear!’

‘She deserves to be, doesn’t she?’ said George, looking at the puny figure before him, with a new idea dawning in his mind.

‘Yes, and she shall be!’ replied Prue, nodding her head mysteriously. ‘You wait a little, and you shall see what you shall see!’

‘They’re off to the Continent to-morrow,’ observed George.

‘Who?’ cried Prue. ‘Vernon and Mrs. Fellowes?’

‘No, no, of course not!’ said George. ‘Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes. They’re going to the Tyrol.’

‘Oh, are they? Well, she’ll be out of the way for a bit, at all events. Dick Vernon isn’t going too, I suppose?’

‘No, the piece at the Parthenon is still running.’

‘Oh, well then, there’s no hurry,’ said Prue, ‘we can wait till she comes back, and then Mrs. Fellowes shall see if she’s always going to have her own way, just because she’s married a rich man and has got fine feathers to her back!’



CHAPTER XXIX

AN INVITATION

MR. and Mrs. Fellowes left town the day after George's conversation with Prue, as George learned from the acting manager's remarks to Miss Maltravers. Mr. Fellowes had given him no answer about his play, to his great disappointment. He did not know whether to augur well or ill from this silence; it was quite possible, he thought, that Helen would persuade her husband not to take it. He could not help feeling glad that they were gone; his mortification

would be crusted over by the time they returned, he would not grow hot and cold when he remembered that unlucky scene in the drawing-room in Cavendish Square. He had carefully got out of Vernon's way lately ; who knew if Helen had not told him all about it ? Very likely she had, and they had both enjoyed a hearty laugh over his discomfiture. Since that day George's opinions with respect to Vernon's and Mrs. Fellowes's relations had completely changed. He was ready to believe anything bad of her now ; if he had learned that she had a whole legion of lovers he would not have been surprised. A woman who could so scorn *him* could not be worth much. James Fellowes was a much misused man, there was no doubt about it. Helen was a kind of Lucretia Borgia, capable of any enormity ; her husband was to be pitied,

and positively ought to be informed in what a maze of falsehood and depravity he was living.

In fact, George meant to be revenged on Mrs. Fellowes. She had wounded his self-esteem, and George's self-esteem was to him what his purse is to a miser or her beauty to a woman. He would not spare her, if ever he could bring sorrow near her; every pang of hers would serve to cicatrize his own wound; he wanted to humble her, to demolish the peace of her life. But he was not in any hurry. Revenge keeps, and only grows more acrid and desirable in the keeping. Neither was he inclined to put himself forward. He knew there was a tool ready to his hand. He could use it at any moment, and the time must be well chosen. For the present he would drive Helen as much as possible out

of his mind, and attend to his own affairs.

And, truth to say, these were not in a very flourishing condition. The five and twenty shillings which had seemed such ample provision at first had somehow taken to themselves very small and continually dwindling proportions. He had needed so many things. As he grew more civilised he found out that first one and then another of the garments he had brought with him from home was all wrong in cut, colour, and fashion. What had been smart and man-about-town-like up there at the Bell and Boot was flashy and common down here. He studied Vernon's attire, and soon perceived that his own ideas had been exceedingly elementary. He managed to obtain credit from a confiding tailor in the neighbourhood of the Strand, who

arrayed him at not too enormous a cost in garments somewhat more like everybody else's, and to be like everybody else was George's great ambition at present. For he did not wish to distinguish himself by any personal peculiarities or eccentricities, he was still too conscious of his origin for that. Perhaps in future years, when his pedestal was too firm to be shaken, he might safely indulge himself in certain tastes; but for the present, at all events, the leading idea of the son of the Bell and Boot was to efface any faintest trace which might point to a former state of existence in which patent-leather shoes and cambric handkerchiefs had been articles of luxury unknown and undesired.

He had considered himself obliged to incur one or two other little bills, which lay heavy on his mind, especially on those days

when his creditors sent him more or less polite reminders of his indebtedness. His landlady also, to whom he owed a couple or so of weeks' rent, had an uncomfortable way of noisily climbing the stairs and presenting herself with her arms akimbo, and various unparliamentary expressions on her lips.

George girded against these petty but real annoyances. It was unfair, it was absurd, he felt, that a man like himself should have to trouble about a tailor's or landlady's account. These were the miseries to which genius had so often succumbed—and no wonder. He cast about in every direction for means of supplementing his slender income. It was no use writing more poems—the publishers, poor blind fools, would have none of them. He would not begin another play before knowing the fate of the one already written, to which, with the

sanguine confidence of all young authors, he looked as an almost certain source of fame and emolument. In a month or two, he thought, he was sure to have money. Even if Mr. Fellowes, prejudiced by his wife, refused the play, some other manager was sure to take it. He had nothing of value, or he would long ago have pawned it. At one moment he conceived the idea of writing to his parents for money ; but a certain disinclination to confess himself in straits, and also a very lively recollection of the cheerful hardness of his mother and the saturnine obduracy of his father, dissuaded him from this project. Once or twice the remembrance of his snug little room in Hypatia Street, a room which was truly home, and no grasping landlady's trap, flitted across his mind, and with a sigh he wished that it had been possible for him to

have remained there. If only Mrs. Mellon had had no daughter! Or if Lucy had been going to marry Jarvis! The pity of it!

At last, impelled by necessity, it occurred to him to try his hand at journalism. With a good deal of labour and self-distrust he concocted a British Museum article on 'Superstitions,' and sent it in to one of the leading newspapers. Greatly to his amazement, it was accepted and paid for. George thought his fortune made. A guinea for one day's work! Why, if he wrote one article like that a day, six a week, that would come to—and so on. He did write several more, but they were not all as lucky as the first; some were inserted, and others made their reappearance with the editor's compliments. The guineas which came slowly dropping in,

however, made all the difference to George. He heroically abstained from buying some things he really wanted with the first, and paid it over intact to his landlady, on whom it had a marvellously sweetening influence. Although thus encouraged and enabled to push his way along, George was far from happy or contented at this time. His existence was so small, so restricted, his desires so great, the contrast between what he wanted and what he had so tremendous. Up there, in Lancashire, his aspirations had been vague, undefined, he had not known so precisely as now what he lacked. But now that he had been introduced to the refinements, to the possibilities of civilised life; now that he had seen for himself how cultured and wealthy people lived, he could give a name to each one of the *après convoitises* which

haunted him. He was not modest in his demands on Fortune. Literary fame, worldly ease and position, with all their attendant satellites, were what he wanted, and what he seemed very far from obtaining. He had come to London, prepared to wait for years, if only he could attain to something in the end, but his horizon had grown wider and wider and his patience smaller and smaller. And all the while he felt as if something were just on the point of happening. Every morning he rose with a curious sense of anticipation, he knew not of what, and every night he lay down with the idea that *It*, whatever it was, was only deferred, that it was fast approaching.

He wandered about a good deal, when he was not at the Museum, observing, thinking, plots of plays and stories floating in his brain, mixing themselves curiously with the

realities before him. He was sitting one afternoon in the now fast-emptying Park, watching the carriages with their loads of tired mammas and girls, whose country bloom, paling with the decline of the season, sorely needed the reviving breezes of Scotland or the seaside, when a victoria stopped in its slow progress past him and a voice pronounced his name.

George started, and recognised in the occupant of the carriage Lady Pontifex, whom he had not seen since that first At Home at Mrs. Fellowes's. He was so surprised that he stared for a second or two, then recollecting himself, he took off his hat, but without moving from his chair.

Lady Pontifex imperiously beckoned to him, and as soon as he understood he got up and went to the side of the carriage.

‘Well, Mr. L’Estrange, wool-gathering?’

Shouldn't do that in the Park, you know! It looks very stupid.'

George flushed under the old lady's frank rebuke, and also under her calmly scrutinising eyes.

'You know who I am, don't you?' she asked abruptly.

'Yes, Lady Pontifex,' answered George meekly. 'I had the pleasure of meeting you at Mrs. Fellowes's.'

'Oh, then you have some of your wits about you! By the lack-lustre way you were gazing in front of you when I called you, I thought you had left them at home. Why have you never been to see me?'

'Because—you never asked me,' said George, too unsophisticated in the world's ways to make any other answer.

'Nonsense! I remember asking you perfectly well,' said Lady Pontifex sharply,

‘perfectly well. And what have you been doing with yourself—star-gazing?’

‘Partly,’ answered George, who had quite recovered his self-possession; ‘and I have been doing a good deal of literary work.’

‘Dear me! Ah, you are a poet, aren’t you? What have you published?’

‘We—ell——’ began George, but Lady Pontifex spared him the cruel avowal that as yet none of his poems had seen printer’s ink.

‘I must be going,’ she said. ‘Come in on Sunday afternoon. I shall be at Richmond after then, but I have one more Sunday. And then you can recite, you know. Good-bye!’

She dismissed him as coolly as she had summoned him, and George returned to his chair.

‘Ugly old soul!’ he thought, ‘how she

orders one about ! Ah, these aristocrats ! They never can forget the old tone. It won't be very lively at her house, I should imagine, but I suppose I had better go. It will always be so much experience gained.'





CHAPTER XXX

A PURITAN

‘DOROTHY, this is Mr. L’Estrange, of whom I was speaking to you the other day. Mr. L’Estrange, my niece, Miss Wyvern.’

Thus formally introduced, George bowed to the girl before him, and leaving them to entertain each other, Lady Pontifex rustled away.

Dorothy Wyvern was about twenty-four, tall, very slight, with almost black hair, which, contrary to modern fashion, was

parted in the middle, smoothed down on either side of her forehead, and plaited at the back of her head. Her brow was smooth, rather too narrow and lofty, her nose aquiline, her face long and oval, her mouth well shaped, with slightly downward inclining corners. Her eyes were large, dark-brown, rather round, and fully opened, giving an expression of inquiring wonder almost child-like. She was prettily and fashionably dressed, but wore no ornaments, not even a brooch.

She looked at George attentively.

‘You are an actor, are you not?’ she asked, in a sweet voice with a plaintive ring in it, which at once impressed George.

‘I can hardly call myself an actor yet,’ he replied, with that winning smile of his which so irresistibly drew people to him. ‘I have only just gone on the stage, and have

a very small part. Have you seen our play at the Thespis ?'

Miss Wyvern drew herself together.

'Oh no, I see no plays. I never go to the theatre.'

'Don't you ? Because you do not care for it ?'

'No,' answered Dorothy simply, 'because I think it wrong. I think theatres are a snare to us.'

'Oh !' said George, sitting down beside her and beginning to feel interested.

'May I ask why ?'

Miss Wyvern hesitated a moment.

'Are you going to laugh at me ?' she asked, with an appealing look in her childish eyes ; but the next instant she frowned at herself, and raising her head a little, said, 'But of course it wouldn't matter if you did. One must expect that.'

‘Why?’ said George.

‘Because one generally *is* laughed at if one doesn’t think or do exactly like everybody else; and I am used to it, besides. My aunt is always laughing at me.’

She spoke sadly and bent her eyes to the ground.

‘But I wasn’t dreaming of laughing at you!’ said George earnestly. ‘I only wanted to know why you think theatres a snare.’

‘I think,’ said Miss Wyvern in a low tone, and without raising her eyes, ‘that theatres and all places of amusement like that are wrong, because—because they occupy our thoughts too much, they prevent us from raising them to—to better things.’

‘Ah!’ George said, and at his sympathetic tone the brown eyes ventured just

a little higher. 'I see that you are very good.'

'No, no!' exclaimed the girl eagerly, looking him full in the face. 'No, no! Oh please don't think that. I am so wicked, so full of faults. Why, do you know, in spite of my conviction about theatres, I would have given almost anything the other day to go and see *Romeo and Juliet*. I *did* so want to!'

'And you didn't?'

'Oh no! how could I? I have to do a great many things I don't like, that I feel to be wrong, but aunt Mary has always let me have my own way in things like that.'

'Do you live with Lady Pontifex?'

'Yes, she is my aunt and my guardian. I am an orphan, you know. I have lived with her ever since I was little, and of course

I don't like to leave her now, although this is not the kind of life I would choose.'

'No?'

Miss Wyvern shook her head.

'Oh no, certainly not. Aunt Mary is very, very kind to me, especially as I don't think she likes me much. But there is so much that grates on one.'

She looked round the large, handsomely furnished room, and shook her head again.

'I should like to go into some sisterhood,' she went on, almost as if she were talking to herself. 'I want to live a higher life, to give my time, my money to the poor. I was never meant to lead a fashionable life. I've tried and I can't do it.'

'Your conscience protests against that also?' asked George softly.

'How can it do otherwise? Everything

in it is wrong. Look at what we are doing now! Is this the way to spend Sunday afternoon? Gossiping over a cup of tea, when the church bells are calling us to our duty! Aunt Mary makes me stay—but oh, I feel so wicked, so despicably weak!’

‘Don’t say we are gossiping,’ said George, ‘you don’t know what a good work you may be doing.’

Dorothy’s eyes lighted up with the enthusiast’s ardour.

‘Ah, if I only could!’ she breathed, looking George over with a complete absence of self-consciousness.

‘You do not know,’ repeated George, in a voice full of emotion, ‘you cannot guess what it is to me to hear such words, such noble thoughts. I seem to be a boy again, to hear my darling mother’s tones.’

He paused, choked by his feelings.

Miss Wyvern's eyes had filled with tears.

'What made you go on the stage?' she asked.

George shrugged his shoulders.

'A cowardly fear of starving, I'm afraid, Miss Wyvern. It offered, and I could do nothing else. I was not brought up to work.'

'No, of course not!' she answered, as if that were a thing understood. 'Oh, how dreadful for you!'

'It was hard,' George said quietly.

'But you don't like it, you shrink from it?' she said. 'You will not continue in it?'

George smiled sadly.

'My dear Miss Wyvern, I am afraid that I shall not leave it. I am not strong, and, as I said before, have a cowardly fear of starvation.'

‘*Don’t!*’ she said, shrinking as if the word had wounded her. ‘But,’ she went on presently, ‘you are very clever, are you not? Aunt Mary told me that you had recited beautifully the first time she met you.’

‘But even supposing that I can recite, what good does that do me? Isn’t reciting as bad as acting?’

‘Not quite,’ decided Dorothy after a moment’s reflection, ‘it isn’t the same thing. Oh, how cruel the world is! Why have people taken so much trouble to arrange everything wrong?’

George, with an expression of noble patience, sat mute.

‘Here am I!’ said the girl, curling her lip with an air of self-scorn. ‘Here am I, a wretched girl, for whom anything almost would have been sufficient, left with all that

stupid money, which I can't spend and mayn't give away, while all round me are—you—and hundreds more, forced to sacrifice themselves, their lives, their consciences, just for the want of that very money. And it is so absurd. I mayn't give you some. You haven't any, and I have such quantities, and yet, for some reason which I never can understand, it wouldn't be proper for me to offer you some, and you wouldn't take it even if I did !'

George shook his head.

'Of course not,' he said with pride.

'There, you see ! But isn't it utterly ridiculous ?'

George looked at her ; a long, intent gaze which somehow made her heart beat faster and the colour come to her face.

'And to think,' said he gently, 'that you should have been alive all these years,

and that I never saw you before! And yet,' he said, after a pause long enough to give weight to his words, 'I think we must have known each other before! We did not meet as strangers, did we?'

'I—I—never talked so to any one before. I think I generally rather bore people,' she said naïvely.

'Perhaps we knew each other in a former state of existence,' suggested George.

She grew grave.

'How could that be? There is no mention of that anywhere. We have no grounds for believing that we ever existed previously to being born on this earth,' she said solemnly.

'Of course not!' replied George, 'I was only fancying. But it does seem strangely sweet to find so congenial a mind as yours in this cold, hard, money-seeking city.'

‘You are not a Londoner?’

‘No. I come, as I daresay my accent tells you, from the north. We are a Lancashire family, Lancashire for the last few generations, that is; originally, of course, we came from France.’

‘Huguenots?’ Dorothy asked with interest.

‘Exactly. I am an only child, and like yourself an orphan. That should be an additional bond between us.’

‘Yes,’ whispered Dorothy.

‘I have suffered greatly,’ said George, passing his hand wearily over his forehead. ‘The world is unkind to the penniless, and my father, poor old gentleman, left me nothing.’

‘How dreadful! Was he ruined?’

‘Ye—es, in speculation. I was brought up as the son of a wealthy man, with every

luxury that my parents could think of lavished upon me. I was idle and thoughtless enough, as many young men are, wasting my talents and my money recklessly. But retribution came. My father lost everything, sank under his misfortunes, and died, and I was left—to go out into the world, without a profession, with habits of ease and idleness, with a sore heart and the clothes upon my back !’

‘And your poor mother ?’

‘Ah—my mother !’ said George in a deeper tone. ‘She, dear soul, was mercifully spared. She died before we lost anything, died in her bed, with one hand in mine, the other in my father’s.’

Dorothy looked up after a moment.

‘Thank you so much for telling me !’ she said softly. ‘I am so sorry for you !’

‘But I am so glad to have met you,’ returned George, letting his eyes say more than his tongue. ‘I may come again, may I not?’

Dorothy blushed, and looked towards her aunt, who was busily talking at the other end of the room.

‘I don’t know—we are just going to Richmond,’ she answered, maiden modesty preventing her from saying, as she felt, ‘Oh yes, do come!’

‘I could not bear to be shut out of Paradise again!’ said George boldly.

Dorothy felt obliged to give him a reproving glance.

After that Lady Pontifex came up and asked him to recite. He had the satisfaction of reducing Dorothy to tears with one of his most pathetic poems, and the still greater one of pleasing his hostess,

who cordially invited him to come and see her at Richmond any Sunday that he liked, and who, on his departure, voted him a 'most charming and useful young man.'





CHAPTER XXXI

A ZEALOT

DOROTHY Wyvern was the orphan child of Lady Pontifex's sister ; her parents had died within six months of each other, leaving her to her aunt's care. It was from her father, Colonel Wyvern, that Dorothy had inherited the most salient traits in her character, traits which puzzled and annoyed her aunt from the very first. Colonel Wyvern had as a young man ardently desired to enter the Church, and it was only at his father's express command

that he had given up his own wish and gone into the army instead. All his life he had secretly cherished the idea of one day retiring and taking holy orders. This design he had, however, successfully concealed from every one, his wife included. Mrs. Wyvern would not have heard of such a thing. She called her husband bigoted and fanatic, and possessed the most supreme disdain for those things which he held most dear. And Colonel Wyvern was in truth of the stuff of which fanatics are made. Had he lived in a less easy-going, tolerant age, his conscience would have ordered him to burn, slay, torture, without remorse, all for the sake of that future salvation on which, since his childhood, he had kept his eyes earnestly fixed. The austerities which he could not inflict upon others he practised personally. No one

would have suspected that the tall, soldierly, essentially manly-looking Colonel was in the habit of imposing the most childish penances upon himself, that his mind was as self-absorbed, as self-analytic as that of a hysterical monk, that the man to whom personal fear was a feeling absolutely unknown went in continual soul-haunting dread of an angry, a terrible Deity.

The Colonel had been deeply in love with his wife when he married her, and had never since ceased to reproach himself with a criminal indulgence of his own worldly weakness. Loving her, he ought to have put aside all thought of her, it was an opportunity for self-sacrifice that he had missed. The struggle between his natural feelings and his unhealthily tender conscience served greatly to darken his wife's life. Her husband would be extravagantly

affectionate at one moment, and the next, remembering that he had again fallen into a snare of the Evil One, he would suddenly assume an apparent indifference and stolidity which might well have tried the patience of any woman, even if she had understood what it was all about. Mrs. Wyvern was very far from doing this, however. To the last she never mastered even the alphabet of her husband's inner life. She thought him cold, inconsistent, and mean; his want of pride and joy in her beauty piqued and wounded her; she never dreamed that he counted each slight to her as one more victory over that original sin, the spectre of which was ever at his elbow, urging and tempting him to fall. She felt that he expected her to live up to a moral standard so distressingly high that to breathe its rarefied air would be death to

her ; she therefore, after a few vain attempts to bring him down to a more reasonable level, abandoned him to his own gloomy path, and for a few years danced merrily along, taking all the pleasures and distractions that came in her way, and keeping herself from crying at her husband's cruel coldness by laughing at him. Then she died, and within six months Colonel Wyvern, worn out by his long conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil, followed her to the grave.

Between the two poor little Dorothy had been rather badly off. Her mother had spoiled her, dressed her beautifully, and had never taught her anything. The Colonel, taking as his guide the literal meaning of the hard old Jewish saying, 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' had done his best by repeated severities to drive out of her the old Adam which gave him-

self such perpetual trouble. He had never allowed himself to caress his child, to praise or to reward her. A less severe look, a dignified motion of the head, was all the encouragement the little girl ever received from him ; and yet Dorothy had worshipped her father, had loved him with all the passionate devotion of a child's heart, while for her pretty, softly-speaking, doting mother she had had only the half-contemptuous, patronising affection of the strong for the weak. For Dorothy was her soldier-father's true child. She could hardly toddle alone before she realised the meaning of the word Duty ; when other children were romping in their nurseries, careless of everything but games and mealtimes, she, with a small lip bitten hard, was learning the lesson of self-control. At six she could repeat whole chapters of the bible, the catechism, the

gospels, collects, creeds, by heart ; at eight she would lie awake at night for hours, searching her innocent conscience through and through lest she might have forgotten some sin of which an all-avenging God had taken cognizance, and which he would visit upon her as surely and as severely as her earthly father did those crimes which came under his own observation.

Fortunately, perhaps, for her future, the Colonel died before she was nine, and she was transferred to the care of her mother's sister, Lady Pontifex. Never was change more complete. Dorothy's mother had stayed for months at a time with Lady Pontifex, but Dorothy and her father had always lived at home together. The Colonel had left the army at his father's death, and had taken up his abode at Forest Langley, a beautiful old house in

Somersetshire which, with the family mansion in Grosvenor Square, had come to him. He had never wanted to go to London, his wife used the town house when her sister could not have her, but the Colonel had buried himself at Forest Langley, which he had never left again. There he could live as his conscience dictated without exciting undue comment, and there he could bring up his only child according to his own ideas. Having long since despaired of converting his wife, he was all the better pleased that she should be away so much, for the less Dorothy saw of her the better. So that when, at his death, Dorothy came to London, it was for the first time, and she had never even seen her aunt.

Lady Pontifex was very ready to be kind to her sister's child. Dorothy was rather

an important person, for she was her father's sole heiress ; and although in his will he had directed the town house to be sold, and the proceeds divided among several societies for the propagation of the gospel, Forest Langley belonged to Dorothy, as well as a small estate in Yorkshire, which he had never visited. Strangely enough, he had appointed no guardians in case of his death ; the anticipation of a future life had so fully occupied his thoughts that it had never occurred to him that Dorothy might be left behind. Lady Pontifex was just the very last person he would have chosen, but she was also Dorothy's nearest and almost sole relative ; and so, failing any instructions in the will, the charge of the little orphan had devolved upon her. She had no children of her own, knew nothing about children, and cared little for them, but she

cheerfully accepted the responsibility of Dorothy's education, and conscientiously did her best for her niece according to her lights.

Sir Harry, Lady Pontifex's husband, had been killed out hunting in Africa, leaving his widow a comfortable jointure, to which, however, the sum paid for Dorothy's maintenance formed a by no means despicable addition. It was lucky for the little girl that she was thus independent, for it is probable that had she been a penniless orphan the peculiarities of disposition, which Lady Pontifex only sighed over and deplored, might have assumed far other proportions.

'She's the very strangest little creature you ever saw!' said Lady Pontifex to a circle of her dearest friends one afternoon soon after Dorothy's arrival. 'What can one

say to a child who refuses jam at tea because she has been impatient with her maid, and must punish herself, forsooth! I assure you that she cried bitterly the other day because I insisted upon her eating meat at dinner—she said she liked it so, and wanted to deny herself!’

‘Extraordinary!’ chorused the friends.

‘She won’t warm herself when she’s cold, she never runs about or plays like other children, and if one happens to laugh or make a joke she has a trick of looking reprovingly, so with those great brown eyes of hers, that’s perfectly exasperating. I can quite understand now why poor Dolly never could get on with the Grand Inquisitor!’

‘Why do you call him the Grand Inquisitor?’ asked one lady, while the others giggled.

‘Because he was just like one’s idea of a Spanish Inquisitor. I always thought of him as wearing a sort of hood, you know, with holes for his eyes. You’ve no conception what sort of a man he was to live with. Why——!’

And then the heads came closer together, and sundry little exclamations of horror and surprise testified to the extraordinary nature of the late Colonel’s eccentricities.

Lady Pontifex did her best, her very utmost, to efface Dorothy’s early training, and to render her what she called a respectable member of society. She invited other little girls to stay with her, she gave children’s parties for her, sent her to other children’s houses, made her learn dancing, dressed her fashionably, and had a French maid for her, who was instructed to be as gay as possible with mademoiselle. But it

all made no difference. Dorothy was far too docile to resist her aunt's will. She went where she was sent, and did as she was told; she learned to dance with a tragic expression on her small features, she was polite and attentive to the children into whose company she was forced; she wore her smart clothing without a murmur, although she would infinitely have preferred to be attired in a yellow cap and a San Benito; she took her French maid's jokes and shrill laughter with exemplary patience. But through it all she never changed. She had the soul of a Puritan, she always would have. Her aunt's treats and luxuries she regarded as so many penances, which it was her duty to submit to. If ever she found herself contemplating some worldly pleasure with the faintest degree of inclination, she took herself severely to task, and punished

herself remorselessly for her momentary backsliding.

As she grew up, and it became evident that no coercion would have the least effect upon her, Lady Pontifex began to accept the situation. It was to her interest to keep friends with Dorothy, for she was by no means disposed to lose the additional income which she found so agreeable, and which Dorothy abandoned so entirely to her management. When the girl came of age she told her aunt of her great wish to join a sisterhood, but Lady Pontifex received the idea with unfeigned consternation, and so wrought upon her niece's feelings by playing the lonely widow, for whom, if her beloved Dorothy left her, there would be no more solace upon earth, that Dorothy, always dutiful and ready to sacrifice herself, had given up her cherished

wish for the time. It was a real sacrifice to her, for the atmosphere of fashion and frivolity in which she was living was more than distasteful to her. She could not absent herself wholly from the drawing-room, Lady Pontifex made it a point of affection that she should appear there; but it was sorely against her conscience and her will that she took even a passive part in the society talk, gossip, and light laughter that went on around her. How gladly she would have left her aunt's bright house and crept away to some quiet cell, where, between white-washed walls, with only a glimpse of the peaceful sky through the narrow window, she could concentrate her mind on things eternal; where, by self-mortification and abasement of soul, she could propitiate that Deity to whom her present mode of life must be a daily offence. If only she could

have done some good to somebody! But no one wanted to be done good to. It bored people to be talked to about their souls. She had found that out very early. Her aunt's frivolous life appalled her. Every night and every morning she interceded on her knees for her kind old relative, who, she firmly believed, unless repentance came before it was too late, was doomed to endless torture in the world to come. Poor aunt Mary! How could she leave her, how abandon her in the midst of her sins? Was there not always a chance that her heart might be touched, that some day she, Dorothy, might be able to sow the seed of salvation? This hope, and this only, reconciled her to her life. She had no right, she felt, to leave one stone unturned, she must wait, watch, and pray. This was the time of probation for her, it behoved

her to bear what was sent her for her good.

And so she lived on, a nun in spirit, a fashionable young woman in appearance, to whom the world had been lavish of its favours. People were not attracted by her. Her exceeding conscientiousness, which caused her to weigh almost every word before uttering it, made her seem awkward and shy. She had never acquired the art of light conversation, she never read novels, thought it wrong to go to the theatre, and self-indulgent to listen to much music. How could she converse with the ordinary society young man? He frightened her, and she seemed 'quite too awfully slow' to him. With girls she got on even worse. Although, by her maid's care, she was always beautifully dressed, she took not the slightest interest in her clothes; she

was too literal-minded to exchange innocent badinage, too delicate-minded even to think of things which they talked about as matters of course; she genuinely enjoyed reading sermons, and thought George Eliot light literature beneath her!

The conversation with George was really the very first unconstrained talk she had ever ventured upon with any one. She could not understand, in thinking it over afterwards, how she could have spoken to any one so freely, and to a perfect stranger, too. What spell had this tall young man with the sad gray eyes cast over her, that her tongue should have been unloosed? Would he laugh at her, she wondered wistfully? No, she did not think he would, she was sure he was too good for that. His eyes looked good and true, they had met hers so frankly, so full of sympathy.

And yet he was an actor, one of those persons who for money exhibit themselves on a stage, travestying and making light of things sad and sinful enough in real life. Although she had never been inside a theatre, she had acquired, from the conversation of her aunt's friends, a pretty accurate idea of what went on there; she had heard plot after plot discussed, until her cheeks had burned for very shame. She had read some of Shakespeare with her governess; and, as she had confessed to George, had really felt tempted to go and see *Romeo and Juliet*, but she had only found in the temptation an opportunity for self-conquest, and had even blamed herself severely for allowing the thought to enter her mind. It was really a thousand pities that Mr. L'Estrange should be an actor. Surely the fear of starva-

tion itself ought not to prevail on one so to lower, to degrade oneself! She resolved to wage a crusade against his profession; there must be other things he could do; she would think it over, and when he came to Richmond, as she hoped he would, she would try to make him see that it was better even to starve than to allow oneself to be drawn into the devil's net.





CHAPTER XXXII

AT RICHMOND

GEORGE debated long with himself as to the propriety of going down to Richmond the very next Sunday. Inclination said yes ; he had been really fascinated by Dorothy Wyvern, whose grave, maidenly speech and looks were far different from anything he had ever seen ; she interested him, piqued his curiosity ; he longed to hear her gentle voice again, and to see those modest brown eyes shyly uplifted to his. But he feared to appear eager or

pushing; even if Dorothy did not think him so, Lady Pontifex might, and he was anxious to avoid anything of that sort.

He was still wavering on the Friday, when he met Vernon in the Strand.

‘Hallo, old boy! it’s a long time since I’ve seen you. What on earth have you been doing with yourself?’

‘No good,’ responded George listlessly. ‘I’ve been in the blues and didn’t feel up to coming round to you.’

‘If I’d known I’d have come and dragged you out!’ said the actor genially, slipping his arm through George’s. ‘Come and have some luncheon with me.’

George, quite assured from Vernon’s manner that Helen had told him nothing, allowed himself to be led away to Vernon’s favourite restaurant, the one where George had first met him.

‘Do you remember that day?’ asked Vernon, pointing to where George and he had sat. ‘By Jove, you were a cool hand—and how splendidly you’ve got on since!’

George made a grimace.

‘I don’t think I’m much further!’ he said despondently.

‘Oh yes, you are. You mayn’t be much better off in one way, but just think of all you’ve done and seen since then! Why, no one would know you for the same man!’

Vernon was good-naturedly trying to point out the difference, with the idea of cheering George. He would have been startled could he have seen into his companion’s heart, which was just then boiling over with hate and spite. But Vernon never imagined that George regarded him with anything but the same warm liking

he felt for George. His own mind was too openly generous to suspect meanness in others.

‘I heard from—the Tyrol this morning,’ he said presently, when they had begun their luncheon; ‘and I heard something about you!’

‘About me?’ And George turned cold, although he knew from Vernon’s tone that his news could not be uncomplimentary to himself.

‘Yes. About a certain play. I congratulate you, old fellow.’

George gasped.

‘My play! What—what was it? I haven’t heard a word about it.’

‘Oh, perhaps then I oughtn’t to have spoken, but I thought of course it was all settled.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Well,’ said Vernon, wishing he had not spoken about it, ‘I don’t suppose it’s a secret. I heard that Fellowes is very much pleased with a play of yours that he took away with him.’

‘Yes?’ said George breathlessly.

‘That’s all, and you had better forget I told you—it was awfully stupid of me to say anything about it. Here, keep up, old chap,’ for George had turned white and was leaning back. ‘Suppose we have a bottle of fizz to celebrate the good news. Waiter!’

‘When—when is Mr. Fellowes coming back?’ asked George.

‘Not for another month or so,’ answered Vernon, looking at the wine card.

George sat with a dazed feeling upon him. Fellowes liked his play! Although George had always stoutly maintained to himself

the impossibility of the manager's doing anything else, yet in the background there had always lurked a fear of refusal. The news seemed too good to be true. Directly he had finished his play he had straightway forgotten the difficulties with which he had wrestled in writing it; it appeared to him wonderful now that a few sheets of paper which he had covered so quickly should really be going to come out as a play, to which his name would be attached, which would bring him renown and money.

‘I wonder Mr. Fellowes has not written to me,’ he said presently.

‘Don’t you know that it’s one of Fellowes’s idiosyncracies never to put pen to paper if he can possibly help it? Besides, the play couldn’t be produced for months yet; there’s no hurry about it. I wish I had not mentioned it to you.’

Seeing that Vernon was really vexed, George pulled himself together and began to talk about other matters.

‘What are you going to do with yourself on Sunday?’ he asked.

The answer took him by surprise.

‘I’m going down to Richmond,’ Vernon replied. ‘Old Lady Pontifex has taken a villa there, and beguiled me into promising I’d go down.’

‘She asked me too,’ said George.

‘By Jove, that’s awfully jolly! Let’s go together.’

‘I’m not sure whether I’ll go this Sunday,’ said George.

‘Oh, nonsense! you’ve nothing better to do, have you?’

‘N—no,’ allowed George, after a pause, as if he were thinking over his other engagements.

‘Then come with me,’ and after a little persuasion George agreed to go.

Miss Wyvern’s name was not mentioned, but when they were in the train on Sunday Vernon asked George if he had ever met her.

‘Solemnity and dulness personified, isn’t she?’ he said, when George answered in the affirmative.

‘I like her; there’s something quaint about her.’

‘Too quaint for me!’ returned Vernon. ‘She looks at me as if I were Mephistopheles himself, just because I happen to be an actor. It’s the funniest combination, old Lady Pontifex, who’s up to any larks, and that stiff, puritanical little creature.’

George was not ill-pleased to hear Vernon’s opinion of Dorothy; he had been afraid that she might be the attraction at

Richmond, and that he might find himself relegated to the second place.

They found Lady Pontifex, surrounded by a jovial party, sitting out on a delightfully shady lawn sloping down to the river. Dorothy sat a little apart, looking pale and serious. She brightened at sight of George, who immediately made his way over to her.

‘I’m so glad you’ve come!’ she said impulsively. ‘I can’t talk to any of those people!’

‘Can’t you?’

‘No, they ask so many questions, and when they find out that I’ve been nowhere, and know nothing about novels and fancy-fairs, they look at me so strangely, and I know they think me dreadfully stupid. Aunt Mary likes me to be out here, so I stop, but it does seem such a terrible waste of time!’

She clasped her hands and looked yearningly away across the river.

‘How well I understand!’ said George.
‘It is very hard for you!’

‘Oh, I ought not to complain,’ she answered quickly. ‘I have so much to be thankful for—but it is hard to bear sometimes, especially when I remember how my dear father would have disliked anything of the sort for me.’

‘You lost him many years ago?’

‘Yes, I was only eight,’ and, impelled by that same magnetic force which had taken hold of her the first time she had spoken to George, she began to tell him about her childhood. Her voice flowed on in a slow monotone, and George listened, filling in the blanks for himself.

Dorothy’s speech was, like herself, quaint and antiquated. It savoured oddly of old

Puritan turns of thought ; her spiritual life, the only one which had any reality for her, was shadowed forth with pathetic clearness ; her narrowness of mind and paucity of intellectual interests were evident in every word. To George it was all new.

‘Poor child, what an absolute want of humorous perception she must have,’ he said to himself.

‘How good of you to tell me all this!’ he said gently to Dorothy. ‘I shall carry it all away with me, and go over it again and again when I am alone.’

Dorothy turned her brown eyes, lustrous with the joy of appreciation, upon him. It was a new experience for her to interest any one, she was so accustomed to being made to feel that she was dull.

‘Have you a photograph of your father?’ asked George after a pause.

Dorothy opened a locket she wore on her watch-chain and held it towards him. He stooped forward to look at it, she bent her head too, and they gazed at it together.

‘What a noble face! he looks every inch a hero!’ said George, and, after a moment, ‘I should have known you for his daughter anywhere—you are wonderfully like him.’

‘Do you think so?’ asked Dorothy, surprised. ‘People always tell me I am the image of my mother.’

‘Perhaps you are like them both,’ said George, nothing abashed.

‘I wish you could have known my father!’ said Dorothy, after a pause. ‘I am sure you would have got on well with him.’

If George had enjoyed the inestimable privilege of being personally acquainted with the Grand Inquisitor, as Lady Pontifex

called Dorothy's father, he would have been more struck with the humorous side of this speech than he was. He replied gravely,

‘I wish, indeed, that I had known him. But he would probably not have cared for my acquaintance, nor wished you to speak to me. Remember what I am.’

Dorothy looked steadily at him. Would her father really have disliked her to speak to this man, simply because he was an actor? Her loving memory, across which the years had thrown the witching veil of Time, recalled Colonel Wyvern as implacably stern and upright, but also as strictly just and impartial. She had been too young when he died to have realized his narrowness, his blindness, his fanaticism; to her he had ever since been the type of saintliness, towards which she herself must struggle. No, he would not have sent

away this man, this hoverer on the borders of the camp of the Philistines. He would have pleaded with him, wrestled with him, but he would never have turned away his face until he had saved the soul that was in peril. Had not George been mercifully permitted to come into contact with her for this very purpose—that she might influence him towards righteousness. It was not chance that had brought him to her aunt's house, it was not chance that had led her to speak to him from the first moment as she had never yet spoken to any man; no, it was Providence. A great work had been reserved for her to accomplish, she had been given a man's soul to save; from those heavenly choirs above, the pure delights of which were now rewarding her father for all he had suffered on earth, his spirit was perhaps at this

instant anxiously looking down to see that his daughter was proving herself a true soldier's child, worthy of the name she bore.

Dorothy's ideas were somewhat confused on the subject of heavenly bliss ; it was so difficult to imagine the Colonel allowing himself to expand or be at ease under any circumstances ; but her pious faith assured her that he was happy, and she humbly attributed her difficulties of imagination to the defects of her own earthly and unsubdued nature.

While these thoughts passed through her mind, she kept her gaze fixed upon George's face, until he grew uncomfortable, and uneasy lest he should have made a false step in suggesting that her father would not have approved of their acquaintance.

Presently, however, to his relief, the grave features relaxed, and with a smile which, although George was too blind to see it, had in its calm radiance some faint reflection of another world, Dorothy said earnestly,

‘No, do not think that—never think that. My father would have been sorry, but he would have understood, he would have liked you, just—as I do.’

The words were uttered as quietly, as naturally, as if George had been another girl. There was not the faintest suspicion of coquetry about them, no tinge of colour rose to the pale cheeks, the steady brown eyes wavered not in the least: Dorothy might have been some angel sent from on high to stretch out a helping hand to a poor struggling sinner, caught fast and sinking in the quicksands of the world.

George felt the impersonal element in her sympathy, and was vaguely irritated by it. He, George L'Estrange, was not to be pitied and rescued just as if he were an old woman or a coal-heaver.

He leaned forward again, and, looking straight into the ecstatic eyes still fixed upon him, said in low tones quivering with emotion,

‘Thank you. And I too—like you.’

The eyes dropped at once, and Dorothy drew back, her cheeks rosy enough now. But George was too clever to allow her to think just then.

‘Tell me more about yourself,’ he said softly. ‘You cannot think what balm it is to my heart to hear about your peaceful, quiet life. It makes me feel as if my dear mother were still with me.’

And, reassured, Dorothy raised her

innocent eyes again, and did as she was told.

‘How well Mr. L’Estrange seems to get on with Dorothy!’ observed Lady Pontifex to Vernon, glancing towards the two as they sat, with heads very close together, poring over the locket.

‘I think he admires Miss Wyvern very much!’ replied Vernon.

‘Oh, does he indeed? he need not waste his time,’ returned Lady Pontifex, ‘Dorothy would never have anything to say to an actor.’

‘It seems to me that she is saying a good deal to him!’ laughed Vernon.

‘Oh yes, asking him how often he goes to church on Sundays, and whether he doesn’t think it very wicked to sit by the river and smoke. But she never would go any further.’

‘I know Miss Wyvern thinks actors the ungodliest of the ungodly.’

‘She does, poor child. One can’t be angry with her, she is so thoroughly genuine, but still her bigotry does exceed all bounds at times. Just imagine what she did the other day,’ and Lady Pontifex poured forth a relation of Dorothy’s latest scruples and oddness of behaviour.

‘Well—converted, old chap?’ Vernon asked of George, as they walked away.

George looked at him queerly. It irked him to keep his amusement to himself, but he had reasons for doing so.

‘I feel very good,’ he answered.

‘I should rather think you did!’ said Vernon with a laugh. ‘Like a condensed Ancient and Modern, eh? I never saw any one so solemn in all my life. But you and Miss Wyvern seem to row well in the same

boat. She wouldn't make a bad wife for you, for she's got lot's of tin, only the aunt would never hear of it.'

'Nor would Miss Wyvern marry an actor,' answered George.

'No, but you could reform, you know. Put on a white tie and go and preach to people in the Park, or interest yourself in the early-closing movement, or teas for costermongers, or something of that sort.'

George laughed and changed the subject. He knew what he meant to do.





CHAPTER XXXIII

VISITORS

ON the Monday after that first expedition to Richmond George received a letter from Mr. Fellowes.

‘Dear L’Estrange,’ it ran, ‘I have read your play and like it very much. I think that, with a few alterations, it would do for the Thespis. We shall not be back until September, when we can talk over things. If you would like to have your manuscript before then I will send it you ;

but if you don't want it I will take care of it.—Yours faithfully,

JAMES FELLOWES.'

'Short and sweet, not a word of praise,' thought George, 'just what I might have expected. Well, I suppose I may take it for granted now that my play is accepted.'

He strolled round to Vernon's rooms in the afternoon to tell him that he had heard from Mr. Fellowes, but Vernon was out, so he came back to his own lodgings. The maid-of-all-work met him on the stairs. She was as hopelessly shabby and dingy-looking as usual, but seemed to be attempting to rub some of the accumulated dirt off her face.

'Oh, if you please, sir,' she began, lowering the apron with which she had been vigorously scouring her cheek, 'there's a person, which

I couldn't call him no gentleman, a waitin' hupstairs for you. He rings at the door bell, and when I answers it, "Is Mr. L'Estrange at 'ome?" he says, quite hairy-like. "No, sir, he ain't," I says. "Then I'll step hupstairs and write a note," he says, and before I could turn round there he was, a 'oppin' up the stairs as bold as brass. I didn't know but what he might be one of them hareasneaks, so I goes up after 'im, and if he wasn't in your room, a pokin' into all your drawers and things. "Drop that!" I says, "or I'll go for a pleeceman." He whips round and sees me, and says all sweetlike, "Oh, I'm not a doin' no harm," he says, "I'm a friend of Mr. L'Estrange's," and then he takes and kisses me, nasty imperent thing. I'll tell missus when she comes in, and——'

'Never mind, Sally, let me go up and

see who it is,' said George, wondering who the intruder could be. 'I'll tell him how angry you are.'

Sally departed downstairs, muttering something about 'stinkin' of spirits,' and George ran up, three steps at a time. On nearing his room he heard some one whistling softly, and looking through the half-closed door, whom should his dismayed eyes behold but Mr. Mellon, busily and agreeably engaged in compounding for himself a glass of whiskey and water; George's whiskey bottle stood on the table, and from the state of its contents he was sure that it had already been in use.

George's first impulse was to steal out of the house again, leaving his visitor to wait until he was tired of waiting, or until the whiskey was gone; but Mr. Mellon gave him no chance of escape. Although his

back was turned to the door, the looking-glass was just in front of him ; and in this, as he raised his tumbler to his mouth, he caught sight of George.

Without turning round or putting down his glass he said, in the thick, liquor-laden voice George knew so well of old,

‘ Come in, L’Estrange, come in. I’ve had to wait some time for you.’

George sulkily entered the room and came up to the table.

Mr. Mellon nodded familiarly and took a long draught from his glass. Then he lifted the whiskey bottle from the table and contemplated it with his head on one side. He had no intention of breaking the silence, and his manœuvre was successful, for George, losing all patience, burst out,

‘ What is the meaning of this ? ’

Quick as thought Mr. Mellon put down

the bottle, ensconced himself in the arm-chair, and putting the tips of his fingers together, drawled forth,

‘That’s hardly the way to welcome a old friend, my boy!’

‘Old friend!’ cried George. ‘You were never a friend of mine. I hoped to have seen the last of you and your family.’

‘Oh, did you, by —— and —— and ——’ returned Mellon, rapping out oath after oath without apparent excitement or raising his voice in the least, ‘then you made a —— and a —— mistake. You’ve not done with ’Enery Mellon yet, and so I tell you.’

‘Go to the devil!’ said George, keeping his hands off him with difficulty.

‘Oh no, I won’t—might meet you there, you know,’ answered his guest with a wink, which had the effect of completely exasperating George.

‘Tell me what you want, or get out of my room!’ he cried angrily.

‘My young friend,’ replied Mr. Mellon with an oily smile, ‘I shall be delighted to tell you what I want. That’s precisely what I came for. I want you to marry my gal Lucy.’

‘You and your Lucy can go and be hanged!’

‘That’s very kind, but it’s no answer. Will you marry her?’

George sat down upon the corner of the table, and looked at his visitor with an amused expression of countenance, which by no means accurately interpreted the state of his mind.

‘May I ask, sir?’ he inquired, with elaborate politeness, ‘if Miss Mellon is aware of the step you have taken?’

Mr. Mellon writhed uneasily in his chair. He did not like the young man’s tone.

‘Don’t you try to bully me, sir!’ he said.

‘Does your daughter know that you have come here?’

‘What’s that got to do with it. I’m her father, ain’t I. Do you think her father’s goin’ to stand by and see his gal’s ‘appiness made ducks and drakes of by a young Judas from the country like you? I s’pose you think she ain’t got any one to stand up for her, but you backed the wrong ‘oss when you thought that, and so I tell you.’

He paused, winking his eyes hard, and then helped himself to some more whiskey and water, a proceeding which, George felt, added insult to injury.

‘I thought, of course,’ George said, still in the peculiarly quiet tone which was so irritating, ‘I thought, of course, that Lucy would have told you all that had passed between us.’

‘So she did, so she did,’ interrupted Mellon, whose judgment was diminishing as rapidly as the whiskey. ‘Always tells her poor old father everything. God bless her!’

‘In that case,’ continued George, ‘you must be already aware that she and I have parted by mutual consent.’

‘You’re a scamp, that’s what you are!’ observed Mellon thickly.

‘Certainly, if you like,’ said George cheerfully, ‘you ought therefore to be exceedingly glad that I am not going to enter your family.’

Mr. Mellon arose, finished his whiskey and water, took up his stick, and slowly walked to the door. When he got there he turned, and said solemnly,

‘Then your punishment be upon your own head! You may expect to hear from me again.’

George made a movement, which Mr.

Mellon interpreted as being of a threatening character. He withdrew hastily, saying as he did so, in the same deep voice, 'Shame upon you, young man!'

With these words he departed, and George heard the street-door bang.

He threw himself into the armchair his visitor had so lately occupied, and groaned aloud.

Here was a pretty state of things! Just when his other affairs were looking so bright, too! Fool that he had been! He wished the Mellons, one and all, at the bottom of the sea. He was still sitting savagely brooding, when there came a timid knock at the door, followed by a second and louder one.

'Come in!' said George.

No one appeared, and after a moment George got up and flung open the door,

prepared to wage war upon whoever had dared to disturb him.

He saw no one, but, on making a step forward into the passage, nearly fell over a male figure which, on hands and knees, was apparently hunting for something on the floor.

‘Who is it? What are you doing there?’ asked George testily. The man lifted up his face, disclosing the features of Mr. Jarvis.

‘What, another?’ growled George, backing into his room.

Mr. Jarvis made a dart at something, and rose awkwardly to his feet.

‘A threepenny-piece I dropped from my glove as I knocked at the door,’ he said, exhibiting the coin in question. ‘May I come in?’

‘I suppose so,’ returned George crossly,

and Mr. Jarvis entered. He looked at once at the whiskey bottle and glass on the table, and pointing to them said,

‘Your own?’

‘I thought they were,’ answered George, ‘but within the last quarter of an hour I’ve begun to doubt it.’

Mr. Jarvis glanced nervously round the room. Then leaning forward he asked in a low voice,

‘Has *he* been here?’

‘If you mean that drunken brute Mellon,’ said George, ‘he has.’

Mr. Jarvis sat down and wiped his forehead.

‘Did he say anything?’ he asked.

‘Well, you don’t suppose he only looked at me. Yes, he did say something, gave me some of his infernal impudence.’

‘What did he say?’

‘What does that matter to you?’ asked George roughly. ‘But you know well enough, anyhow. I’ll swear you’re in the plot too.’

‘No, no, no,’ said Mr. Jarvis excitedly, ‘that’s just where you make a mistake. There *is* no plot; or if there is, Mellon’s got it all to himself. Lucy and I and Mrs. Mellon aren’t in it.’

George eyed the little man gloomily.

‘H’m. Well, it’s no use trying to bounce me,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing to be got out of me. I’m not going to marry Lucy, and that’s all about it.’

‘But we don’t want you to marry Lucy,’ cried Mr. Jarvis; ‘we don’t want you to—none of us.’

George smiled a fatuous smile.

‘What, not Lucy?’ he asked.

Mr. Jarvis straightened his narrow back.

‘No, Mr. L’Estrange, not Lucy!’ he answered proudly. ‘Lucy, Miss Mellon I should say, will in a few months’ time be transformed into Mrs. Jarvis.’

‘Woman was ever fickle!’ said George with another smile.

‘Fickle, sir? She was never fickle. She was led away for the time—a very short time—by gaudy appearances, Mr. L’Estrange, but she soon returned to the heart that has loved her truly and long.’

It was utterly absurd of him, George felt, and yet a spasm of jealousy passed through him at hearing that Lucy had so speedily consoled herself. He reflected, however, that it would be impolitic to show anything of the sort.

‘Then I must congratulate you,’ he said as heartily as he could. ‘I’m sure you’ll make a very good husband, Jarvis.’

‘Thank you, Mr. L’Estrange,’ said Mr. Jarvis, beaming.

‘How did you know that Mellon had come here?’ asked George.

‘From some words he let drop at dinner,’ said Mr. Jarvis. ‘I happened to be there, as I’ve got my holiday this week, and Lucy sent me off quick to tell you that you were not to mind anything he said. He’s been very bad lately, you know. Had an awful attack o D.T.’

‘Poor old chap!’ said George loftily. ‘Of course I shouldn’t have taken any notice of anything he said. I could see he had been drinking heavily.’

‘Yes. The doctor said he wouldn’t be able to stand it much longer. He’s sure to have another attack presently, and that ’ll probably carry him off.’

‘And you’re waiting for that, I suppose,’ laughed George.

Jarvis coloured and fidgeted.

‘N—not exactly,’ he answered, ‘we shall be married very soon. Lucy wishes it.’

‘And how is Mrs. Mellon?’

‘She’s low, very low. She feels her husband’s goings on, and the Army doesn’t seem to comfort her any longer.’

‘That’s a pity.’

‘Yes. Well, I must be going,’ said Jarvis, rising.

‘Won’t you have some?’ asked George, nodding towards the bottle.

Jarvis shook his head.

‘No, thank you, I never take anything of the sort now. Lucy made me sign the pledge.’

He departed, and George, flinging himself back in his chair, laughed heartily.

‘Poor little chap! Made him sign the pledge, did she? Poor little fellow! Ha, ha, ha!’





CHAPTER XXXIV

NEWS FROM HOME

GEORGE went down to Richmond the very next Sunday, and for several Sundays in succession after that. He found a ready welcome, for old Lady Pontifex had conceived quite a liking for him, and looked for him every week. He had soon lost his awe of her, and was able to show her the very best side of himself. He amused not only her, but also her guests, a difficult and yet desirable thing to achieve. For Lady Pontifex did not always find it easy to get amus-

ing people to come to her. There was not enough to tempt them ; Dorothy was not a favourite, and Lady Pontifex besides lacking brilliancy in herself, did not care to entertain liberally, but was rather addicted to buying bad wine and expecting her visitors to be delighted to come all the way from London for high tea. Friends of her own sex she was surfeited with ; there were at least ten ladies who would have asked nothing better than to take up their permanent abode at the Richmond villa ; but these were only stopgaps, people convenient to talk to when nothing better offered. They formed an appreciative audience, but in themselves they were deadly dull. And Lady Pontifex was eminently a gay old lady. She liked to be amused, and George amused her. He was always ready to play and sing for her, and as all his songs had the charm of fresh-

ness and originality, and had not been screamed out at every fashionable party of last season, Lady Pontifex and her friends enjoyed them immensely. Then his recitations, comic and otherwise, were hugely successful, and, as he for once husbanded his repertory skilfully, lasted a long time.

Altogether, he was a most desirable young man to have about the house, and as he wasn't 'anybody yet, you know, dear,' it was not necessary to waste either politeness or money upon him. Lady Pontifex kept him to high tea—an infliction to which Vernon submitted only once, and never again—and George sat demurely, and ate his minced mutton, and drank his atrocious claret with the most placid expression of enjoyment.

Lady Pontifex watched sharply at first to see whether there were any signs of 'nonsense' between the young actor and

Dorothy. Anything of that sort she would not have ; George was all very well as a kind of standing entertainment, but he was not good enough for Dorothy to marry. Her eyes, however, although she flattered herself they were keen enough, could detect nothing beyond ordinary everyday courtesy between the two. Dorothy never seemed to her either to brighten at George's coming or to droop when he went away. She was looking very well this summer, better, her aunt thought, than she had ever seen her. She had more life in her, too ; Lady Pontifex had actually heard her singing to herself more than once about the house. True, it was a hymn-tune that she sang, but for Dorothy to uplift her voice at all was a novelty. She was as equable and docile as ever, and seemingly more content with her life ; of love-sickness her aunt could discern no

trace. Neither did Mr. L'Estrange appear to her to be trying in any way to win the girl's affections. He was of course polite and attentive to her, as the daughter of the house, but he never addressed his conversation to her in particular, nor looked at her a second longer than was proper. So Lady Pontifex after a while dismissed the fear from her mind, and having once done so troubled herself no more about the matter.

And yet all the while George was teaching Dorothy to love him. Slowly, slowly, he was undermining the prejudices, the principles, that had stood so firm all these years. At first he allowed her to think she was helping *him*; in the many little talks they had together he deferred to her, meekly acknowledging himself to be weak and wrong, and yet always contriving to give one slight blow to the wedge, the thin

end of which he had introduced almost at their first meeting. And presently, when he felt that what he said possessed the importance of a lover's words, he grew more audacious and less humble, so that Dorothy had sometimes to listen to him instead of preaching herself.

She had liked him very much from the first, soon she began to respect him, then she began to love him, and from love to faith there was but a short step. She forgot to examine her conscience as strictly as usual before going to sleep; in the effort to remember the exact colour of George's eyes the minute peccadilloes over which she had been wont to mourn passed unheeded; she allowed herself to join in jokes and laughter which would once have seemed sinfully frivolous, but did not George joke and laugh, and had he not said that gloom was a sign

of a narrow and stupid mind? And she could not be doing wrong, because she felt no self-reproach; on the contrary, she was happier now than she ever remembered to have been.

Although her aunt had never uttered a word to her on the subject, she instinctively felt that Lady Pontifex would not approve of her love for George; she was therefore particularly careful to keep it to herself, never even mentioning his name. As her habits had taught her complete reticence, she found no difficulty in suppressing all signs of any special interest in Mr. L'Estrange. And so, all through those beautiful summer days, George came and went, working his way ever more surely into a foolish, romantic girl's heart, and pursuing his own designs with his usual steady cautious persistency.

During the week - days he was still hammering away at his articles and at his scheme of self-education, sometimes spending the whole of the day at the Museum, sometimes writing at home, but always by himself, making no new friends, and rarely seeing even Vernon.

He was coming back one day from the Museum, and was on his way to the little restaurant he affected, when he suddenly felt a hand clapped somewhat roughly on his shoulder. He turned round, with a fear that it was old Mellon, and was thunderstruck at recognizing a familiar face. It was young Mostyn, an acquaintance of whom in the old days he had been rather inclined to be jealous, as being in a better position than himself, but whom he had always heartily disliked.

‘Hullo, Collins!’ said the young man

loudly, 'who'd ever have thought of meeting you? Why, we all thought you were dead and buried!'

George shook hands with anything but a beaming countenance. What a bore! What on earth should he do with this young beast?

'Whither away?' jocularly asked Mostyn, taking in with curious eyes every item of George's attire. 'You're such a swell nowadays, though, that perhaps you don't care to speak to a poor shabby fellow like me. I'm down on my luck, while you're up, I see.'

Looking at him, George was aware that his quondam friend had not exaggerated when he had called himself shabby. Mostyn's garments were, indeed, in almost the last stage of respectable seediness, and he himself had an air of dejected dissipation very different from the smart, dapper,

cynical young clerk whom George had been almost proud to be seen out with.

‘Glad to see you, old chap!’ he said, with a good deal more heartiness than he would have exhibited had Mostyn been as flourishing-looking as of yore. ‘Come to my room, it’s just close by, and we’ll have a crack.’

Although he disliked taking the young man home with him, he shrank still more from the idea of staying in the street with him, or of going with him to any of the places at which he was almost sure to be recognized by some of those friends who only knew him under the name of L’Estrange. Mostyn was certain to roar out his confounded ‘Collins’ at the top of his voice, as he had done just now, and that would be particularly disagreeable.

Mostyn followed him, and George settled him in the armchair and despatched Sally

for the materials for a frugal meal. Then he took a seat opposite Mostyn, who had been staring at everything in the room, and said cheerily,

‘Well, here’s my home, you see. It isn’t palatial, is it?’

‘It’s as good as the old one, anyhow,’ returned Mostyn curtly. He resented what he considered the patronizing and superior tone in which George spoke.

‘I daresay—and a precious sight dearer. And now tell me, old chap, what are you doing in London?’

‘Came down to look for something to do,’ growled Mostyn. ‘I’ve left the old shop.’

‘Not good enough, I suppose.’

‘Not likely!’ said the ex-clerk, omitting to mention that he had been requested to leave at a moment’s notice, on account of some ridiculous discrepancies in his books.

‘A fellow might slave himself to death for an old curmudgeon like the governor, and never get his salary raised nor a ha’porth of credit for his work!’

‘And have you got something to do here?’ asked George, who was particularly anxious to ascertain whether the young man intended to remain in London or not. The answer reassured him.

‘No, I’ve been here a fortnight, and couldn’t find anything. But to-day I called on an uncle of my mother’s, and he’s promised me a berth in his place at Bordeaux. I’m to go out next week.’

‘I congratulate you!’ said George, adding internally, ‘and myself too. And now, tell me, how are all the old folks up yonder?’

Mostyn looked hard at him.

‘You’ve not troubled yourself much

about them, from all I've heard,' he said disagreeably.

'I've not given them news of myself because I had no good news to give,' said George feeling much more inclined to show his friend the door than to answer him civilly. 'I've fought my way along all these months without asking for help from them, and they'll think none the worse of me for that.'

'*Them?*' said young Mostyn, 'there's only one of them. You know your father's dead, of course.'

George's eyes opened. 'Dead, my father dead? When? How?'

'I supposed you knew, or I wouldn't have mentioned it,' said Mostyn, inwardly delighted to be the bearer of ill news. 'He died a couple of months gone from a cold he caught coming home dr—a little fresh

one night. He lay in the road for two or three hours, they said, and the rain soaked him through and through. He died three days afterwards.'

George covered his eyes with his hand. He had not often thought of his parents since he left home, but when he had it was always as the lusty, tough old peasants who were going on living exactly as they had done ever since he could remember. It had never occurred to him that death might seize either of them. He had always arranged that when he had made his fortune, he was to go down to the Bell and Boot in a princely kind of way, and enjoy the triumph of showing them to what heights their despised son had risen. He had pictured to himself his old father's open mouth and respectful admiration at the sight of the real, solid 'brass' which he

would bring as a visible token of his success, his old mother's clamorous affection and twinkling eyes full of cupidity. He felt sorry that his father should have gone—gone without ever realizing what a mistake he had made in belittling and snubbing his genius son.

Of love for his father he had been destitute—it would have spoken but little for his spirit if he had possessed any. The close-fisted, heavy-handed old publican was not a parent either to respect or revere. George had feared him in his childhood, despised and disliked him in his youth and early manhood. He felt no grief that the old man should have died so far away, not knowing whether his only son were dead or living; he felt no remorse at having left him without news; he only felt aggrieved that he should have been done out of his triumph.

‘Perhaps I’d better go,’ said young Mostyn, making as if to get up, ‘you’d likely rather be alone after what I’ve told you.’

‘No, no,’ answered George, removing his hand from his eyes, ‘don’t go. Stay and talk to me. It—it comforts me.’

‘Precious lot of comfort *he* wants!’ thought young Mostyn, but he said ‘all right.’

Here Sally, bumping in with the things she had been sent to buy, made a timely diversion. George helped her to arrange the table, and begged her to borrow his landlady’s teapot.

‘And my mother?’ he asked, when the girl had clattered upstairs with the Britannia-metal teapot and the information that ‘missus would want it again in ‘alf a hour.’ ‘My mother, how is she?’

‘She was all right when I saw her last,’ returned young Mostyn, making a terrific onslaught on the bread and butter.

‘Is she still at the Be—at the old place?’

‘Bless you, no!’ said Mostyn, whose ancient sprightliness seemed to be returning as his inner man grew more content, ‘bless you, no! The old man’s affairs were awfully involved. He died in debt, and the pub had to be sold to make things straight!’

‘Died in debt!’ repeated George. ‘Why, I always thought he was worth a good bit of money.’

‘Ay, and so did every one else. But that was where they were out of it, you see. He died in debt, and the old woman had to turn out.’

‘And she is——?’ queried George.

‘At her sister’s; you know your old aunt

Hannah, who takes in washing down in Paradise Court,' answered Mostyn, rejoicing at being able to wound George, who he knew had always objected to this respectable but hardly aristocratic relation of his mother's.

'And is she—badly off?' asked George, hating his visitor worse than ever, but feeling that he had better know all.

'I don't fancy so,' said Mostyn. 'I saw her just before I left, went about some shirts of mine that your aunt Hannah had been getting up, and she looked pretty comfortable. People said, I know——' he paused, as if reluctant to go on.

'Well?' asked George impatiently.

'Oh well, only I'm not sure that you'll like me to say it. People said that the old lady had taken care to feather her own nest, and that if old Collins died bankrupt she

had a good bit of brass packed safely away for herself.'

He stopped and held out his cup for more tea, looking in George's face for the traces of annoyance he hoped to see there. He was disappointed, however. George poured out the tea carefully, without showing the very least discomfiture.

'Any more news?' he asked, when Mostyn had taken back his cup. 'How is dear old Wilkins?'

'As mealy-mouthed and backward as ever.'

'Ah! And Simpson?'

'Simpson's wife's dead, and he's making up now to Wilkins's eldest girl, who's young enough to be his daughter. As if he hadn't been wife-ridden enough all these years!'

'Poor Mrs. Simpson, she was a good soul,' said George gently.

Mostyn gazed at him with a curl of his lip.

‘Dear me! You *have* got soft-spoken!’ he observed contemptuously. ‘And what are you doing, if a fellow may ask? Published any of those poems yet?’

‘I’ve had no time to think of poems!’ answered George mendaciously.

‘H’m, I expect you’ll find them hard to get rid of,’ said Mostyn dryly. ‘Have you gone into business?’

‘No,’ answered George, after a moment’s reflection, ‘I am employed—at a theatre.’

‘Lord! What as?’

‘Oh, I only have a very small salary as yet,’ said George, ‘just enough not quite to starve on, that’s all.’

Young Mostyn was quite ready to believe this, for two reasons. First, because George’s room by no means inspired him

with respect; and secondly, because he possessed an extremely low opinion of George's abilities. He had always said, when they 'cracked him up' at the Bell and Boot, 'Let him go where clever people are, and then see.'

He therefore took leave of George without attempting to borrow anything from him, and in the first letter which he wrote home, mentioned that he had come across George Collins in London, living in a miserable hole, and evidently finding it hard work to get enough for his keep, let alone, he kindly added, the fortune he had always boasted he could make with his 'pieces' and trumpery strumming on the piano.

George was glad to see the last of him.

'Little brute!' he thought, as he made

his way quickly round to the Thespis.
'Thank Heaven I was able to shake him
off. I hope my meeting him isn't going to
be an ill omen for my other affairs.'





CHAPTER XXXV

AN ACCIDENT

IT was September, and Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes had returned. Mr. Fellowes was always glad to get back to his work, he was by no means an adept in the art of idling, and was essentially a town mouse. His wife, on the contrary, was passionately fond of the country, and would have regretted having to leave the beauties of the Tyrol for smoky London, had it not been for a certain restless longing to see Vernon again. Never had the summer holiday seemed so

long, never had she so eagerly counted the days until their return. And yet she had been glad to go. She had told herself that she would be happier, safer away from Vernon, that she could teach herself to forget him, when there was no longer the chance of seeing him almost every day. But, instead of forgetting him, she had found herself wearying, longing with the most painful intensity for just one sound of his voice, one touch of his hand.

The days had dragged by slowly, drearily. She had not given way ; she had exerted herself, as a model wife should, to make his holiday agreeable to her husband, had walked with him, had driven with him, had talked to him, had listened to him. But she had felt, all the time, that it was a hollow pretence, and had often wondered

whether he, poor James, knew that her heart was not in it. He was so good, so unselfish, so considerate; she reproached herself bitterly with her treachery towards him. For she knew she was treacherous. Having no love for him, she had let her heart slip away out of her own keeping, and moreover, instead of at once putting herself beyond temptation, instead of smothering the unlawful feeling before it got too strong for her, she had fostered it, cherished it, wrapped it tenderly round until it had grown and thriven, and become the chief object of her life.

Sometimes she thought that when she got back to London she would take just one short week in which to prepare herself, and would then banish Vernon for ever. But then always came the remembrance that she had no right to send him away. He had

never said a word that all the world might not hear, how could she assume that he cared for her? Would not a dismissal be simply an avowal of her own feelings, and was not the concealment of these the most important thing?

At other times she even proposed to herself, in her trouble, to tell her husband, and ask him to take her away somewhere, or to let her go and live quietly in the country; but it was only in the hours of the night that she could harbour this idea for a moment; with daylight would come the knowledge of the impossibility of such a course, for his sake as well as for her own. So she came back in the same unsettled, unhappy state as before, bearing the evidences of her mental disturbance on her features, which had grown to wear a strained and dull look.

Mr. Fellowes sent for George almost immediately.

He was glad that the manager gave him an appointment at the theatre, and not at his own house. Bold as he was, he had no wish to re-enter Mrs. Fellowes's rooms as yet.

They had a long conference. Mr. Fellowes expressed himself in terms of approbation which were strong for him, and intimated that he was willing to take the play. He went through it with George, pointing out the necessary alterations, and urging him to set about making them at once. He behaved as generously as he always did in the matter of money, handing George a cheque for a sum which, though not enormous, had the effect of considerably raising the young man's work in his own estimation, and promising him a royalty on all performances.

George went away elated, almost wild with excitement. He proudly paid his money into a bank, receiving in exchange a cheque book, the mere sight of which made him quiver all over. Feeling the need of a confidant, he called at Vernon's rooms, but Vernon was out.

'At Mrs. Fellowes's, of course,' he thought with a sneer. 'Well, I'll go on to Miss Maltravers's. Prue will be in, at all events, and I can tell her about my play.'

Prue was at home, as he had expected, and all eager sympathy and delight.

'What's the name of it?' she asked.

'*Damon and Pythias*. We're going to have sandwich-men fastened two together, dressed alike. Mr. Fellowes has thought it all out, and he's going to get Le Breton, the Academician, to do us a poster.'

‘Splendid!’ cried Prue. ‘How I wish I could come and see it.’

‘But so you can, and so you must,’ said George grandly. ‘You can drive down quite early on the first night, and I’ll take you in by the stage door. Or you could come to the dress-rehearsal, if you’d like that better.’

‘We shall see,’ said Prue. ‘I should like to go. I hope there’s a good part for Gwen?’

‘First-rate. I wrote it on purpose for her, you know.’

‘Gwen’s looking awfully tired and ill,’ said Prue sadly. ‘I don’t know what to do about her. She hardly sleeps at all at night. I hear her from my room tossing and turning about, and in the morning she looks as if she couldn’t stand.’

‘Perhaps she has been working too hard,’ suggested George, but Prue shook her head.

‘No, work never hurts her, she likes it. She worries, that’s what it is, and that reminds me, have you seen Mrs. Fellowes since she came back?’

‘No.’

‘Have you seen Dick Vernon lately?’

‘No, I called on him just now, but he was out. Of course we know where he had gone, don’t we?’

Prue’s eyes kindled.

‘To *her*, I suppose. I daresay she wrote to him to come. Ah well, Mrs. Fellowes, it’s my turn now. Don’t be astonished at anything you may hear, Mr. L’Estrange,’ she said with a long, low, malicious chuckle.

‘Don’t get yourself into any trouble,’ said George, aware that a hint of danger was all that was required to set fire to the train.

‘Don’t be afraid! I shall proceed cautiously,’ said Prue.

For the greater part of the next two days the little hunchback was shut up in her own room, with pen, ink, and paper. She was apparently engaged on something of great importance, for her door was kept locked, and no one, not even her beloved Gwen, was allowed over the threshold. At the times when she was sitting with her sister she was excitedly, tearfully affectionate.

‘Is anything the matter with you, darling?’ Gwendoline asked once, after Prue had got up three times in the course of an hour to throw herself upon her sister in a wild embrace.

‘Anything the matter? Why?’ said Prue, growing crimson.

‘Because you seem so restless, dear,’ answered Gwendoline.

‘It’s old age creeping upon me,’ said Prue with a sharp little laugh. ‘I shall be

catching you up directly, Gwen, if you don't look out. I'm sure I look older than you already, and goodness knows I feel about a hundred.'

'You'll never catch me up, child,' responded Gwendoline absently, and Prue, having thus successfully turned the conversation, took care not to kiss her sister again for awhile.

On the second day she was more curious in her manner than ever, going about muttering to herself, and giving shrill laughs and chuckles for which there seemed no reason whatever. She followed Gwendoline into her room when she went to dress for the theatre, and helped her to put on her things.

'It's a fine evening, isn't it?' she said, drawing aside the blind and peering out. 'The stars are not out yet, it's quite light

still, but they'll soon come out. It gets dark about eight, doesn't it ?'

'Hardly by then, I think, but you ought to know better than I, for I'm always shut up in the theatre at eight,' returned Gwen. 'Now I'm ready. My gloves, please, dear ; why, there they are, behind you, on the bed. Coming down with me ? Oh, take care, don't fall !' as Prue, after a way she had, slid down the banisters, arriving on the mat long before her majestic sister had got to the foot of the stairs.

'Never fear !' laughed Prue. 'Good-bye, old lady, be in good form, and play your best.'

She hugged her sister close, and stood looking at her as she walked away. Gwendoline always, when she could, travelled by omnibus. Every penny saved meant so much additional comfort at home.

Left alone, Prue gave a comical shudder.

‘Ugh! Now for it! Not just yet though, it’s so awfully light. It’ll be quite dark at nine, and the servants will be having their supper. Old Gwen never noticed that I didn’t give her her latchkey when she changed her gown. Poor old Gwen—there are a lot of gray hairs in her front hair lately, I wonder whether she’s noticed them.’

She wandered about restlessly for an hour and a half, going often to the open window to see how dark it was.

‘Now it’ll do, I should think. I shall only look like a short person, not a crooked one, in this light.’

She took a sealed envelope out of her pocket and looked at it.

‘I don’t think I’ve left a trace,’ she said half-aloud. ‘There’s no mark on either the

paper or the envelope, and I'm certain no one could recognize the printing.'

She put the letter back in her pocket and went upstairs to her own room, where she got out the cloak she so seldom wore, which had been carefully made to conceal almost all trace of deformity, a queer little bonnet, and a thick black veil, all of which she put on, taking many an anxious look at herself in the glass.

'How dreadful it 'll be if any boys laugh at me!' she thought. 'I do wish I hadn't to go. But it's for Gwen, and I must do it.'

Slowly and cautiously the quaint little figure crept downstairs, stopping on the landing to peep over and assure itself that Ben and Eliza were safely shut up in the kitchen. She went through the open drawing-room window and let herself softly

out at the garden door. That door once shut behind her, she glanced apprehensively up and down the road. Not a soul was in sight, and she breathed more freely. She set off, keeping as close to the wall as possible.

‘I wonder how far I must go, so as to have another postmark on the letter,’ she thought. ‘That’s just one of the questions one can’t ask. I might have got Mr. L’Estrange to tell me, though.’

She went out so seldom as to be quite ignorant of the streets around her home, and after she had gone some little distance had not the faintest idea where she was. She chose those ways which looked quietest, but they all seemed dreadfully full of people to her. She shrank from the eyes of the passers-by, who, she fancied, gazed at her curiously, although in truth her small figure moved

along almost unheeded. At last she thought she must have gone far enough ; she was in a part wholly unknown to her. Summoning up all her courage, she crossed over to where a policeman was standing at the corner of a street, and asked him in a trembling voice if he could tell her where she was. The man looked down at her, and then stooping, said,

‘ What did you say, missy ? ’

‘ Can you tell me what part this is ? ’ she repeated, shaking all over with nervousness.

‘ Why, this is Westbourne Grove,’ said he kindly, his eye having by this time made out the irregularity in the short form before him.

‘ Is—is—am I far from St. John’s Wood ? ’ she faltered.

‘ Why yes, that you are, a good long step,

missy. Best take an omnibus, if you want to get there. You bide by me, and I'll put you into one when it comes along.'

'No, no, thank you. I—I only wanted to know,' and Prue, fearful of interference, flitted away down the road.

'Rum little thing!' said the policeman to himself. 'Shouldn't wonder if she was a bit gone,' tapping his forehead significantly.

Prue's only thought now was to find a letter-box. Then her work would be done, and she could return home. And oh! how tired she felt. The strain of the last two days was beginning to tell upon her, she longed to go to bed and rest.

Here was a letter-box. Now to draw the letter from her pocket and slip it into that fateful slit, where, in company with so many other messengers of weal and woe, it shall

lie until the time comes for it to speed forth upon its errand. There—done now, past recall. Could she walk back? No, she was so very weary, and her head ached so badly. She would take a cab—she had some money in her purse—and dismiss it at the beginning of the street.

A hansom passed, she hailed it timidly.

‘Hansom, miss? All right!’ and the man drew up at the side of the pavement.

She gave the name of the street, and then, holding on to the rail of the splash-board, began to climb into the cab. The step was high for her, but she had just succeeded in touching it, when a shrill voice reached her ears,

‘Hullo, Hunchy! Oh look ’ere, ’ere’s a Hunchy climbin’!’

Losing her nerve she let go the rail, and fell. There was a quick movement of the

horse, a piercing cry of 'Gwen!' and then—oblivion!

Just at that moment the postman came up, emptied the letter-box, threw the heavy bag over his shoulder, and, with a careless glance towards the crowd on the pavement, walked away in the direction of the post-office.





CHAPTER XXXVI

CONVERSION

THE day after George's satisfactory interview with Mr. Fellowes he went down to Richmond. Although it was not Sunday he had no fear of his reception. He had been there on many a week-day during the past six weeks, and knew, with a most agreeable certainty, that he would be welcome. And so he was.

‘Here you are at last, Mr. L’Estrange!’ said Lady Pontifex when he was announced. ‘We have been thinking you had forgotten all about the tableaux.’

‘No indeed, Lady Pontifex!’ returned George, shaking hands with his amiable smile, and never so much as glancing towards the corner, in which, as he was well aware, Dorothy Wyvern was sitting. ‘No indeed, but I have been so awfully busy I really could not come before.’

‘Busy, indeed!’ repeated Lady Pontifex with mock scorn. ‘As if you young actors knew what it meant to be busy! Busy trying on a new wig for the next new piece, I suppose.’

‘Not exactly!’ smiled George, and speaking very distinctly, ‘but I have a new piece coming out at the Thespis next month, and the arrangements take up a lot of time, of course.’

Although he had his back turned to her, he felt Dorothy start. Lady Pontifex exclaimed, while the visitors who were in

the room all turned their eyes upon him.

‘A new piece ! A piece of your own ?’

‘Yes,’ said George modestly, and no one could have guessed how his heart beat with triumph.

‘And it must be good,’ observed Lady Pontifex reflectively, ‘or else Fellowes would never have accepted it. He knows what he is about.’

‘He has never had a failure yet,’ said one of the people present.

‘Let us hope my play won’t be an exception,’ George said gaily ; and then, suddenly affecting to see Dorothy for the first time,

‘Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Wyvern ! I didn’t notice you were there.’

Dorothy put her hand in his, and lifted her large, reproachful eyes to his face.

‘I know exactly what you are thinking,’ he murmured; ‘but don’t be angry with me, I will explain it all to you.’

‘Come out into the garden, then,’ she said, instantly rising, and George was obliged to follow her.

She led the way to the end of the lawn, where there were some chairs beneath a shady tree. It was a lovely day, and the river was full of boats, each bearing one or more pretty girls in various graceful and indolent attitudes, rowed by slenderly-clad and bronzed young men. As George and Dorothy sat down, a Hampton Court steamboat was just passing, crowded with people, and with the usual tuneless band on board, at that moment busily murdering airs from *Patience*.

Dorothy looked at the gay scene with unseeing eyes, and sighed heavily.

‘Don’t! You make me miserable,’ said George.

‘If I could only make you *good*!’ Dorothy returned sadly. ‘I wouldn’t mind making you miserable then!’

George gave a grimace, which his companion could not see, then bending forward he said, tenderly and low,

‘Do you think me so dreadfully wicked, then?’

‘I think you weak,’ Dorothy answered almost passionately. ‘It *is* weak to do what one knows to be wrong.’

‘Miss Wyvern,’ said George in a still low but decided tone, ‘I have been thinking a great deal lately, and, do you know, I am by no means sure that we are right, you and I, in our views.’

He had never spoken so plainly; Dorothy threw a startled glance at him.

‘ Oh, Mr. L’Estrange, why not ? ’

‘ Because,’ said George after a pause, ‘ because I am afraid we are narrow-minded. Now tell me, just for argument’s sake, what is there in the theatre that is wrong ? ’

‘ Everything,’ said Dorothy promptly.

‘ Yes, but particularize.’

‘ Well—it is a place where people go simply for amusement.’

‘ And is all amusement wrong ? Then why do you stay here ? Why do you not go and work, instead of idly amusing yourself from morning till night ? ’ demanded George.

Dorothy’s lip quivered like that of a chidden child.

‘ You know I would much rather go and work. You know this life is no amusement to me.’

‘I know you say so!’ said George icily.
‘Well, what else?’

‘They—they talk of and represent bad things,’ she faltered.

‘Solely to point a moral. If it is so dangerous to talk of bad things, why do they read the Bible aloud in church?’

She shuddered.

‘Oh, Mr. L’Estrange, how can you?’

‘I am only trying to help you to see the truth. Anything else?’

‘They—the women, I mean—I think it is dreadful to show themselves for money—sometimes even to pretend to be quite bad.’

‘You would prefer that they should be so in reality,’ said George dryly. ‘Perhaps you are not aware that the employment they get in that way saves hundreds yearly from going on the streets.’

‘Oh, Mr. L’Estrange!’ whispered Dorothy, shrinking back and growing crimson.

George tossed his head.

‘Ah, I daresay you think I have no business to speak so before you. But since you judge others so severely, so sweepingly, and, if you will excuse me, so ignorantly, it is better that you should hear the truth for once. It is such women as you, who wrap themselves round in their own flimsy, self-woven mantle of impeccability, that do mischief in the world. It is not the poor actress who toils night after night to earn the few paltry shillings that stand between her and starvation, it is not the actor who grins and skips to please a critical public, it is not the manager who gives employment to hundreds of people from the call-boy and carpenters upwards—it is not

these who are to blame. They do the work for which they are fitted, to which they have been called, and do it honestly and well. That there are some actresses who fall, some actors who lead immoral lives, I grant you—but look at your own people—men and women who have estates and incomes handed down to them from their forefathers, who ought to have nothing to do on God's earth but to be sinless and happy, and help to make others so, what do they do? What have the papers been regaling us with lately? It is so easy to judge, so comfortable to think others in the wrong!'

Dorothy was fairly crying now. Since her father died she had heard no words like these. In George's strong, incisive, authoritative tones she heard the ring of truth. Her conscience smote her sorely. She *was* quick to judge, she had done

nothing else ever since she came to live with aunt Mary. She had been like the Pharisee, hugging herself in her own self-righteousness, exaggerating the mote in her neighbour's eye, and heeding not the beam in her own which impeded her vision. How noble, how good Mr. L'Estrange was ! She shyly glanced at him from behind her handkerchief. He was gazing out at the river with far-away eyes.

How almost inspired his face looked—and oh, how very—handsome !

‘How kind you have been—how good to explain things to me!’ she murmured as soon as she was sure of her voice. ‘I see so much now that I never thought of before.’

George turned and contemplated her gravely. Really she was very droll, this quiet meek-eyed girl. He could play upon

her as on a musical instrument. He was quite sure that if he went back on his very thin argument, and told her just the contrary, she would thank him with exactly the same rapt look on her face, and would swallow—believe, he meant—every word he said. He had taken her measure, he knew that if he wanted to win her he must make her feel that he was her master. He looked away again and said nothing.

Dorothy sighed once or twice, peeped sidelong at him, clasped and unclasped her pretty hands, and finally said, in a very small voice,

‘Are you—angry with me?’

George raised his eyebrows with a well-feigned air of astonishment.

‘Angry? I? Angry? And with you? Oh, Miss Wyvern, you are forgetting! What right have I to be angry with *you*?’

He laughed a bitter little laugh. Dorothy's eyes filled again, and she gazed at him wistfully. He took no notice. Once, twice, she opened her lips to speak, and each time her courage failed her. Presently she asked humbly,

‘Do you mind telling me what your play is about?’

George put up his hand to hide an irrepressible smile. Miss Wyvern asking questions about a play!

‘If it interests you I shall be delighted to tell you,’ he said, with just a quick flash of his eyes that made her poor little heart beat quickly.

She edged her chair closer to his, and leaning forward, with the deepest interest shining in her childish brown eyes, listened to a detailed account of the play without once moving.

‘Oh, thank you so much, so very much!’ she breathed, when he paused. ‘It is a beautiful story, when will it be performed?’

‘As soon as possible.’

‘I must see it!’ cried Dorothy, then blushing, she turned her head away.

‘But I thought theatre-going was wicked!’ said George maliciously.

‘Since you say it isn’t——’ murmured Dorothy, and George gave a smile of triumph.

‘You must feel very happy,’ the girl said presently.

George looked quickly at her.

‘Happy? Because my play is accepted? Oh no, Miss Wyvern, that does not make me happy!’

He muttered something to himself.

‘What did you say?’ asked Dorothy.

George looked straight in front of him.

‘What did you say?’ she asked again.

‘Nothing—nothing that matters.’

‘But I heard. You said it would take something very different to make you happy. Wasn’t that what you said?’

George bowed his head.

‘What did you mean?’

‘Never mind,’ he answered almost roughly.

‘Oh but—do tell me,’ she said persuasively. ‘It matters so very much to me.’

George gave her a long look, letting his eyes meet hers.

‘Don’t tempt me!’ he said, turning away, ‘don’t be so cruel.’

‘But I want to tempt you!’ she returned playfully, and neither Lady Pontifex nor any one else would have recognized the saintly Miss Wyvern. ‘I want to tempt

you. Tell me—do tell me. What is it that would make you happy?’

‘You know,’ he muttered, ‘and you have no right to force it from me.’

‘But who has a right, if not I?’ she said pleadingly.

George turned fiercely on her.

‘Do you know what I am?’ he demanded.

Dorothy opened her innocent eyes wide.

‘Yes, of course I do,’ she answered.

‘A penniless actor, not even a beggar of your own class!’

‘Oh!’ said Dorothy quickly, ‘actors are quite in society now. I heard aunt Mary say so only yesterday. Not,’ she added blushing, and more in her own old tone, ‘that society is anything to us—me, I mean.’

‘Oh yes!’ said George with a sneer,

‘I know they are allowed in drawing-rooms just at present. But they are only tolerated. Do you suppose your aunt would hear of any of her relations, you, for example, marrying an actor?’

‘I am my own mistress!’ Dorothy said, drawing herself up proudly.

‘Well—do *I* suppose then that you would think of marrying an actor?’

‘I shouldn’t *think* of it,’ said Dorothy, with the nearest approach to humour that George had ever seen in her. ‘I shouldn’t *think* of it, but——’

‘But—what?’

‘I should *do* it, if I liked the actor very much, and he liked me.’

‘Dorothy!’ cried George, starting from his chair, ‘do you mean—would you, will you—oh, will you marry me?’

‘Yes,’ said Dorothy. ‘I will.’

‘Oh, my darling!’

‘Hush!’ said Dorothy, drawing back with a little embarrassed laugh, ‘there’s the gardener just coming to water the flowers.’

A quarter of an hour later George was on his way to the station, his head high, his eyes triumphant. He was indeed ‘getting on.’

And Dorothy crept back into the house, and upstairs to her bedroom, and shut herself in. She could not go back to the drawing-room; it would be impossible to listen either intelligently or patiently to that dreadful magpie-chattering. She must be alone, she must have time to think. She stopped before the looking-glass, and gazed at herself. Was that bright face, were those glowing eyes, that smiling mouth, really hers? How happy she looked! And then, directly, the inevit-

able doubts and qualms of conscience began to torment her poor little mind.

Had she any business to feel so happy? Was it right to give herself up like this? Was she not selfishly seeking her own pleasure solely, was she running no risk of wandering from the narrow path which was the only one that led to God? Would she not draw down upon herself some awful punishment—was not the devil tempting her, and perhaps even now chuckling with fiendish delight and triumph?

Poor Dorothy shivered, and looked round uneasily. To her the devil was a real, an absolute entity; she firmly believed that he had been, on several occasions, permitted to make himself visible to mortals, a distinction which she by no means coveted, and the possibility of which had formed one of the numerous nightmares of her childhood.

She opened her locket and gazed at the portrait of her father. Oh, if he could only come back, just for one short hour, just to hear her, to help her, to guide her! And suppose he could, would he approve her? If he should say that she had done wrong—what would she do then? Could she bear to give up George?

If she abandoned George, her George, who had been so tossed about by cruel fortune, and who had left her only now, secure in the certainty of having found a safe haven at last, what would become of him? He was impetuous, passionate. Might he not, goaded to despair, do something awful—perhaps—perhaps—kill himself? And then it would be her fault. She would almost be a murderess!

No, no, it could not be wicked! He had explained it all to her. He said it

was not wrong to be happy, and he must know, for how good, how high-minded, how noble he was !

She kissed her father's photograph, and shut the locket, barring, at the same time, the door to all future hesitation and doubt in her mind, and resolving, with all the strength of her self-sacrificing nature, to set before her only one object, to know only one aim—the happiness of her lover, George L'Estrange.





CHAPTER XXXVII

STRICKEN

MISS MALTRAVERS went home that night in a particularly serene frame of mind. Twice within the last two days she had seen Vernon, and each time he had been attentive and kind, with almost the old manner which had so often brought joy to her heart in the days of long, long ago. He had looked at her as if he saw her, not in the blind, inattentive way which mortified her so, had told her she was looking fagged and ought to take a rest, and

had discussed with her his *rôle* in the new play which was to be produced at the Parthenon in the autumn. Was it—could it be, that he was awakening from his long infatuation, that he was turning away from the pitfalls and snares set for him by that wicked and designing woman? Had her own warm, despairing love at length penetrated to his soul, had it melted away the glaciers of indifference and forgetfulness, did he at last want her, as she had so long wanted him? A slight basis—a few kind words, an interested look—to build so fine a castle on, but love is hopeful, and poor Gwendoline thought that Vernon had once loved her. It never occurred to her to reflect that Mrs. Fellowes had returned to London, and yet that fact was the most obvious explanation of Vernon's altered looks. He was so glad that Helen had come

back that he could not help feeling kindly disposed towards every one, Gwendoline included.

Gwendoline was mistaken in supposing that he had ever known any warmer sentiment than that of friendship for her. He esteemed her as an artist, pitied her for her lonely life, honoured her for her devotion to her deformed sister, but that was all. She had no charm for him, he did not even admire her style of beauty, although he appreciated it at its full stage value. He always found it somewhat difficult to talk to her, and had indeed often been at a loss to know what to say to her. She was too heavy, too slow in her movements, too melancholy for him. The most modest of men, he would never have dreamed that Miss Maltravers cared for him; what was as plain as daylight to George L'Estrange,

for instance, as well as to a good many other people, was a sealed book to him. In fact, he neither liked her too much nor too little—he thought of her not at all.

But Gwendoline hoped otherwise as she went home that evening, and as she leaned back in the corner of the omnibus her lips parted in a happier smile than they had known for many months past. She was a sanguine woman; although life had dealt neither kindly nor gently by her, she had somehow always kept a firm grasp on that one good gift that remained in Pandora's box, Hope, and, to a person who has lived on Hope for years, a very small crumb of comfort seems almost a satisfying meal.

She got out of the omnibus at the usual place and walked slowly, for the night was very close, towards her house. Would Prue be sitting up, she wondered, or would

she have been too tired and have gone to bed? How strange the child had been these last days, how restless and unlike herself! Could she be going to fall ill, did she too, perhaps, need change of air and scene? It was a dull life for her, poor darling, cooped up within those narrow garden walls, with no girls of her own age to talk nonsense with, no amusements, nothing but her books and her flowers and chickens. Gwendoline made up her mind that she would go next week and look for lodgings out at Willesden, say, or somewhere like that, where Prue could have real country air and sights. Perhaps she could afford to hire a little pony-carriage, then Prue could learn to drive, she was so quick and handy at anything new. It would make it very late getting home from the theatre at night; but that didn't matter, she

could rest longer in the morning, and then they could ask people—meaning Vernon—down for the afternoon; Prue would like that.

Why, what a crowd in her quiet St. John's Wood road! She had never seen so many people together in that usually almost solitary street before. What was it? A fourwheeler, with a policeman inside it, and—what was the cabman saying?

'Theta Road, she said to 'im, poor thing, Theta Road, the beginnin' of it, she says, and 'ere we are.'

Gwendoline stopped and looked at the cabman. There was a little group of the inevitable boys who seem to spring up in London streets as if by magic in any place, at any hour, one or two women, and a hansom, whose driver had stopped and was giving advice.

Noticing Gwendoline, the cabman touched his hat and said questioninglly,

‘Perhaps you live about ’ere, lady.’

‘I do,’ answered Gwendoline.

‘Then perhaps you might know this pore young party, as was run over by a ’ansom in Westbourne Grove. Theta Road, she told ’im, and then some’ow fell under the ’orse’s feet. Pore deformed little thing, too.’

‘*What!*’ burst from Gwendoline’s ashen lips. ‘Let me see—oh, let me see!’ and she pushed through the little crowd, all of whom were trying to see into the depths of the cab, inside which sat the stolid policeman, supporting—what?

One glance was sufficient. It was Prue—her Prue—that lay there—Prue white and motionless, her lips apart, and seemingly stiff and—not dead—oh, surely not dead!

The bystanders were all sympathy and eager to help, but the handsome dark lady gathered the cruelly maimed little form into her own strong arms, waving them back imperiously. She carried her mournful burden into her house a few steps beyond, and after a moment a page-boy came out and got into the cab, bidding the man drive fast, as he was going to the doctor's. The policeman, taking a note of the house, departed, and after loitering about for a while and staring up at the garden wall, one by one the group of spectators melted away, and disappeared into the night.

‘No, I am afraid there is no hope.’

No hope! The words fell coldly on Gwendoline's aching heart. She stared at the doctor, scarcely realizing their meaning.

The doctor was an old friend, and knew her well. He took her impassive hand in his, and wrung it hard.

‘This is very bad to bear, I know, but you mustn’t give way, my dear Miss Maltravers. She—the child—may need you—presently.’

‘Do you mean she will know me again before—before——?’

‘I think so. I cannot be sure, but it is probable.’

Ever since last night Gwendoline had sat by the bed in her own room, on which she had tenderly placed Prue. The doctor had been with her all the time, not able to do very much for the poor little girl, but too kindly-hearted to go away and leave the elder woman with that terrible blank stony look in her face, and those wide miserable tearless eyes. Now he had been sent

for, and was obliged to answer the summons.

‘Take care of yourself. Don’t break down, for *her* sake,’ he said gently, as he turned to go. Gwendoline caught him by the arm. Her pale lips moved, but he guessed rather than heard the word, ‘When?’

‘I cannot say for certain,’ he answered pityingly, ‘but this evening, probably. I shall look in in an hour or so.’

‘Are you sure, quite sure, doctor, that you can do nothing?’ whispered Gwen.

He shook his head.

‘Quite certain,’ he answered sadly.

‘And is there no one—no one else who could? Is there no one in the whole of London who could save my darling?’

The words broke forth in a despairing cry.

‘Miss Maltravers,’ said the old doctor, ‘there is no one on earth who could save her. If there had been the slightest chance I would have sent for Sir William at once, but there is none.’

Gwendoline let her hands fall heavily to her side.

‘Tell me,’ asked the doctor, ‘have you let them know at the theatre that you will not be able to play to-night?’

Gwendoline shook her head with an expression of disdain. What were theatres to her?

‘I’ll see to all that for you, then,’ and with another shake of the hand he was gone.

Gwendoline sank down again into her chair at the head of the bed. Prue’s motionless features, quieter, calmer than she had ever seen them, lay turned towards

her. The sharp, elfish expression common to all deformed persons had given place to what was already almost the placidity of death; the lines were smoothed out of the low brow, the thin-lipped mouth had lost its sarcastic twist, the bright restless eyes were closed, and the long black lashes, lying against the pallid cheek, lent a peaceful child-like look to the whole face.

Gwendoline gazed, and gradually the knowledge came home to her—Prue was lost, she was dead already. For a day or two longer she might sit by the bed and watch her as now, and then they would take her away, and she would be left alone. Alone! Without Prue! How strange a thought that was! How often had she pictured to herself Prue left alone, but herself—never. And now it had come to this—after all these years of bitter striving,

of love so engrossing that it had often been positive pain—Prue was dying, and she was left. Blankly she sat and looked, her aching eyes hardly seeing what was before them. So wrapped in her sorrow was she that she never heard the door open, nor a soft voice ask leave to enter.

It was Mrs. Fellowes. Quickly comprehending that Gwendoline was incapable of hearing, she came in, and after one swift glance at the silent figure on the bed she folded her arms round Gwendoline and laid the dazed aching head on her breast.

‘My poor, poor dear!’ she murmured, ‘I heard and came at once. Tell me, what does the doctor say?’

Gwendoline raised her head and looked at Helen. The deep, unutterable woe in her tearless eyes told its own story.

‘Oh no, surely not,’ said Helen hurriedly,

‘have you had the best advice? Let me go and fetch Sir William Davies.’

‘No use,’ answered Gwendoline, moving her dry lips with difficulty, ‘it is no use. No one can save her, the doctor said so.’

‘It is too terrible!’ said Helen, and then for lack of words she fondled the dark hair that was resting again on her bosom. So the two sat for a long, long time. In answer to Helen’s whispered inquiry as to whether she could not take a little food, or even a glass of wine, Gwendoline shook her head so decidedly that Helen forbore to press her and sat silent. The doctor came and went two or three times, until evening came, and then he sent away his carriage, and shared the two women’s vigil.

The little chiming-clock in the drawing-room below was just striking six when Prue opened her eyes and fixed them on

her sister. The doctor softly touched Gwendoline and whispered a caution. Helen withdrew into the shadow of the curtain.

For a whole minute the dark eyes—Prue's and Gwendoline's—looked into each other, then Gwendoline's hand stole out and took in hers the fingers that were feebly moving.

'Gwen!' said the echo of the old, shrill voice.

'My darling!'

'I wonder if it went all right. It was for you, Gwen. You will be so happy now. You won't lie and toss any more at night, now, old Gwen.'

'No, dear.'

'I suppose I'm very tired, I feel so light and curious.'

'Lie still, my darling.'

‘Yes, I’ll go to sleep now. And when the morning comes I shall be rested, and then I’ll tell you all about it.’

‘Yes, dear.’

‘Good-night, old Gwen.’

The voice was very feeble now, the eyes were dim.

‘Good-night, my darling!’ Gwendoline bent over and laid her lips on the little girl’s. Prue smiled feebly, her eyes closed, and all was still.

Gwendoline did not move. She seemed almost unconscious, and yet she knew what had happened. The doctor murmured to Helen, ‘Get her away as soon as you can,’ and stole softly from the room.

After a few minutes Helen, down whose cheeks the tears were fast running, put her arm round Gwendoline.

‘Come, dear,’ she said, ‘come away with me. Prue is at rest now.’

‘Leave me—let me be!’ said Gwendoline, ‘I will not go away from her.’

Helen sat down by her and waited. Suddenly the woman before her threw up her arms with an exceedingly bitter cry.

‘Prue! Prue! My child! My own little girl!’

And then, turning eyes haggard with misery towards Helen, she said, in a hoarse, low, quick tone,

‘She wasn’t my sister, you know. People thought so—every one thought so—but she was my child, my very own child.’

‘Come with me, dear!’ said Helen soothingly, thinking that her mind was wandering in the distraction of her grief.

‘No, no, let me tell you—then at least

you will know. I was only seventeen when she was born—seventeen, scarcely older than she is now, my little Prue. He,' lowering her voice still further, 'was a liar, a brute. He took me away from my home and promised to marry me—but he never did. He got tired of me almost directly, and then he began to treat me ill. He knocked me about, and once, when he was drunk, he kicked me. She was born soon after, and that kick must have been the reason of—that'—with a look towards the bed—'then he abandoned me, and if it hadn't been for your husband I should have thrown myself and her into the river, but he saved us. He gave me money till I got strong, and helped me to get employment, and then when he had his own theatre I went there. It was he who told me to say Prue was my sister—he is the only person who ever

knew about it. Oh, how I have suffered and worked—but it was for her, for my little, helpless child, and now—now it is all over, and I am alone!’

Her head fell forward, and deep groans burst from her over-laden breast.

Once more Helen put her arms round her.

‘No, not alone!’ she said caressingly; ‘not alone, for my husband and I will be your friends. We cannot make up, I know that, but we will try.’





CHAPTER XXXVIII

SUSPICIONS

MRS. FELLOWES stayed with Gwendoline the whole of that long, miserable day, and meanwhile her husband sat in his room at the theatre with an open letter before him. He had found it when he went down in the morning, a curious letter, with the address in printing, as well as the short contents. It was unsigned, an anonymous epistle; not the first, by any means, that James Fellowes had received in his life, but certainly the first that had ever been able to

annoy him. For it was the first that had ever cast any reflection on his home life.

‘Are you a fool,’ it said, ‘that you allow Dick Vernon and your wife to carry on their love-making under your very eyes? Cannot you see what all the world, except yourself, saw long ago?’—and so on.

He felt that he ought to tear it up and think no more about it—a despicable coward’s blow in the dark, and yet, and yet—he had neither torn it up nor put it from him; he sat there for hours holding it before his eyes, although at the first reading he knew it by heart.

It was none of his own imagining, then. There really was something between his friend and his wife—the friend he trusted and the wife he loved so well. They had been betraying him—for how long, he wondered? For how long had his shame been patent to

‘all the world’? He had been so stupidly trustful—had he not almost made opportunities for them to meet, had he not himself urged Vernon to come to the house and upbraided him when he stayed away? How Vernon, that false friend, must have laughed in his sleeve; what a poor easily-gulled fool they must think him!

But could it be true—was it possible that Helen, his beautiful, unloving, but clear-eyed and innocent-faced wife, was—no, even in his thoughts he could not utter the word, it seemed like blasphemy. In that room from which her cold looks had excluded him, did she lie awake in her bed conjuring up in the darkness Vernon’s handsome face, while he, her own husband, starved for want of the love to which he, and no one else, was entitled? Did she—here a remembrance of the years which lay

between him and Helen flashed across him. More than twenty—for he was just fifty. Vernon—damn him—was much nearer her own age, a far fitter mate for her than himself, old, ugly, grizzled, unpolished. What chance had he in the field against so good-looking, so gallant an antagonist? None—he had only right and honour on his side, and of these, he thought bitterly, lovers have ever made but little account.

Was it true, or was it not? How was he to find out? Ask the servants? But with a dull flush rising to his cheeks he repudiated the idea. He could not so lower the woman he loved. For that was the worst of it, he reflected piteously. He loved her, he loved her so dearly. Even if he were forced to acknowledge her wickedness he knew that he would love her still. How to find out? He must watch, watch cautiously.

He must become his own detective, spy upon her movements, follow her skilfully, gather his evidence little by little. To this she had brought him—ah, shame upon her !

He would begin this very evening. Vernon was coming home with him to supper, he remembered. He was to come round to the Thespis after his own work was over, and drive home with Fellowes. Very good. He would leave them alone together, and then would listen, and if—oh, if!—he found that the warning which had reached him was true, then he would make short work of them both, the cowards !

Miss Maltravers's understudy replaced her as well as possible considering the short notice, and the play went off all right. Fellowes remained in his own room until Dick Vernon was announced.

Then he feigned to be looking for something in a drawer, and glancing up gave him a careless nod—he could not bear to touch Vernon's hand.

‘Evening, old man,’ said the actor, sitting down on the edge of the table. ‘What a terrible thing this is about poor little Prue, isn’t it?’

‘Terrible! Have you heard how she is?’

‘Dead! I called there late this afternoon, and the boy told me she was just gone. Your wife was there, he said.’

‘Was she? Well, let’s go.’

Vernon, seeing that the manager was upset about something and unwilling to talk, said no more, and they drove to Cavendish Square almost in silence.

‘Has Mrs. Fellowes returned?’ her husband asked as soon as the door was opened.

‘Yes, sir, about an hour ago.’

At the sound of his voice Helen came out of the dining-room. She was very pale, and her eyes showed evident traces of tears.

‘Here you are! How do you do, Mr. Vernon?’

Fellowes watched with lynx-eyes, but he could detect nothing in the polite greeting that passed between the two.

‘They have probably met already to-day!’ he thought bitterly.

‘How did you leave Miss Maltravers?’ asked Vernon as they sat down.

‘Broken-hearted! It is a blow I don’t believe she will ever recover from.’

‘Bah! She is a woman!’ said Fellowes so savagely that the two others looked at him in surprise. They had not been accustomed to hear Jim Fellowes speak like that.

‘I was very sorry to have to leave her,’ said Helen, ‘but I think she will sleep, for she was thoroughly exhausted. I never saw any one so worn-out.’

‘Her whole life was wrapped up in that child,’ Vernon remarked.

‘Yes,’ said Helen, and her eyes sought her husband’s, meaning to convey to him that she, too, now knew Gwendoline’s secret. Fellowes, although he felt her look, would not respond, however, but stared moodily at his plate.

The conversation halted along until the end of the meal, when Fellowes, starting up, observed that the room was unbearably hot, and proposed an adjournment upstairs.

But even when they reached the cooler drawing-room, he did not seem able to make himself comfortable, and after moving

about restlessly, muttered something about downstairs and left the room.

Instead of going down, however, he crossed over to the conservatory, from which he could reach the back-drawing-room, and there, protected from observation by the heavy plush curtain that half hid the door, could listen, and if needs were see. His face was flushed, for he was not used to playing the spy and eavesdropper, but his teeth were hard set and his expression stern and firm.

‘How ill Jim looks to-night!’ were the first words he heard; they came from his wife.

‘So he does, dreadfully,’ answered Vernon. ‘Has he been working too hard lately?’

‘No, I don’t think so. Perhaps it is Prue’s death that has upset him; although

he didn't often see her I fancy he was very fond of her. He had known her so long.'

Silence for a few moments. Then Helen's voice said softly, 'Poor little Prue!'

'And poor Prue's sister!' said Vernon.

'Yes, indeed. Do you know, poor little Prue never liked me. I saw her for the first time this year, and tried to make friends with her, but she wouldn't. She absolutely repulsed me.'

'Prue was strange, poor child, in her notions and ways,' answered Vernon, 'but I wonder at her not liking you. It seems odd to think that any one could dislike *you*.'

'Oh!' said Helen, with an embarrassed little laugh. 'That's very polite, but more polite than true, I'm afraid. I knew several people in the old days, you know, who did anything but like me.'

The man behind the curtain breathed hard. The old days! The days before he had known her, but when Vernon and she had been friends already!

‘I never met any,’ said Vernon. ‘I—I only know I was not among them.’

‘Ah, no! You and I were always friends!’ Helen answered, and it was fortunate for her that hearts beat silently, or the knocking of her own must surely have reached Vernon’s ears.

‘You never would let it be more than friends!’ he said hotly.

‘Friendship is a great deal to have,’ she said.

‘Yes, but it is little by the side of——’

Helen held up her hand.

‘Don’t. Don’t say it.’

‘I have kept silent so long!’ said Vernon passionately. ‘I have eaten out my heart

so many months, so many years. It is beyond human endurance not to speak, and you—do you think I have not seen—that I do not feel——’

‘Hush,’ said Helen firmly. ‘You shall not say it. Don’t be so unworthy to yourself, to both of us.’

‘Can you deny that you know I love you, that you love me?’

Helen was silent for a moment. Then she said slowly, ‘No, I cannot deny it. I will not deny it. I do know that you love me—and—God help me!—I know that I love you. But—no, stay where you are’—as Vernon made an eager step forward—‘I also know that if I can dare to acknowledge this to you it is because this must be the last time we meet.’

‘Helen!’ cried Vernon despairingly.

‘Yes, the last time. I have been a

wicked woman not to have said so long ago. I have been dishonourable towards my husband, and so have you, but so long as no word of love had crossed our lips it was not quite so bad. Now it would be impossible. Do you think so meanly of me as to suppose that I would live under his roof, and—pretend—to be all I should be, while my lover was coming and going all the time. Would you drag me down so far as that?’

‘I would not drag you down.’

‘But you would, and yourself too. I have been weak, but I swore to myself as I drove home this evening that I would be so no longer. There is enough sin and misery in the world, let *us* try to be honest people.’

‘And I am not to see you any more?’

Helen shook her head.

‘But what can I say to Fellowes—what excuse can I make?’

‘Anything you like — quarrel with him, pretend I’ve been rude to you, anything.’

‘Helen!’ cried Vernon, ‘you are not really going to send me away like this?’

‘I am — I must. Oh, go!’ she sobbed, suddenly breaking down, and hiding her face in her hands; ‘don’t make it any harder—go.’

Vernon stood and looked at her for an instant—then he said low, ‘God bless you! You are a good woman!’ and turning went slowly out of the room.





CHAPTER XXXIX

A DISCOVERY

JAMES FELLOWES waited until he heard the front-door close upon Vernon, and then crept downstairs to his study. He sat down in his great official-looking chair, took the anonymous letter from his pocket, and gazed at it with a very different expression on his face from that of the morning. That little piece of paper was nothing to him now, and yet, yes, he was beholden to it. Had he not received it, had his jealousy not fired him into action, he would have known

nothing of the scene this evening, the interview that had proved to him once for all that his wife was an honest woman and worthy of his trust. To have learned from her own lips that she loved another man was a pang, but in his heart he knew that he had been aware of this for a long time past. He had been right to trust her—he would never doubt her again as long as he lived. Perhaps, he mused sadly, he might die soon, and then the way would be open for Vernon and herself to marry. For a moment the idea of suicide occurred to him, but he repulsed it with scorn—suicide is a coward's way of getting out of a difficulty, and James Fellowes was above all things a brave man.

He had risen and begun to pace up and down when the door softly opened and Helen herself came in. She looked very

wan and tired, but there was an expression of peace in her face which her husband had not seen there before. He stopped in his walk and smiled at her.

‘Has Vernon gone?’ he asked, trying to speak quite naturally.

‘Yes, he went about an hour ago,’ answered Helen, and then looking her husband straight in the eyes, she said, ‘I want you not to ask Mr. Vernon here any more.’

‘Oh!’ said Fellowes, his eyes falling before hers.

‘Yes,’ said Helen, and then with an effort,

‘And I want you to be very good and kind, and not ask any questions. He has not done any wrong, it is only I—I who—think it will be better so. Will you?’

‘Why of course, my dear,’ answered

Fellowes quietly, 'when have I ever refused anything that you asked me. I—we shall both be sorry not to see him, but I am sure you must have good reasons for what you say.'

'Yes, I have good reasons,' said Helen sadly. 'Thank you, James. You are always good.'

She turned to go, when she caught sight of a crumpled piece of paper which lay upon the carpet. She picked it up and mechanically smoothed it out, looking carelessly at it to see if it were of any importance. Her husband had resumed his walk, when an exclamation from her made him look round.

'Why, James!' she cried, her cheeks all aflame, 'what is this? How infamous! Where did it come from?'

Fellowes cursed his folly. Why had he not destroyed the letter at the theatre?

What evil spirit had induced him to bring it here? He took it quickly from his wife's hand.

‘Why did you look at it? You should never have seen it!’ he said reproachfully.

‘Who sent it you?’ asked Helen, pale with anger.

Fellowes shrugged his shoulders.

‘Some busybody, I expect, who thought he would do you and me a good turn by making mischief between us. Don’t think of it again, dear, it is of no consequence. Look, put it out of your mind as easily as I put it out of existence!’

He lighted a candle, held the letter that had cost Prue her life in the flame, and in another moment it had disappeared.

‘But there are the ashes still!’ said Helen very low. ‘You may burn it, but you cannot get rid of it entirely.’

Fellowes crushed the crisp ashes in his hand, then opened it, and with one puff blew them all away.

‘Now, I defy you to bring them together again!’ he said smiling. ‘Not all the king’s horses, nor all the king’s men——. Come, cheer up, dear, don’t look so tremendously tragic.’

Helen came quite close to him and clasped her hands round his arm.

‘James,’ she said, looking at him wistfully, ‘are you quite sure you trust me—that there is nothing in your mind against me?’

‘My dear,’ answered James Fellowes solemnly, ‘I trust you wholly and implicitly. There is not the shadow of a doubt in my mind.’

He stooped and kissed her.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered, and was gone.

For many days after Prue's death Helen's victoria was to be seen for hours together before Miss Maltravers's door. Helen had quite conquered that poor stricken heart; in the fulness of her grief Gwendoline had forgotten that she had ever been jealous of the manager's wife. It was an awful thing for her to have to live through those first few weeks; like a wounded animal she shunned the light, sitting always in her darkened bedroom, generally with her eyes fixed stonily upon the bed where her little dead girl had lain. She ate scarcely anything, went for days without speaking; only sometimes she would break down, and pour out a flood of passionate words, calling on her child to come back again, not to leave her lonely, to come back and call her mother just once, only once.

Helen hardly knew which was worse,

that mute and stolid misery or these paroxysms of despair. She came and went, keeping the household in order, coaxing Gwendoline to swallow enough food to preserve her from starving, and waiting, watching for the time when it would be possible to break the spell, and call the poor woman back to the world in which, after one fashion or another, she must live.

One afternoon she came in with a lovely bunch of roses. Miss Maltravers was in her usual cramped position beside the bed, and did not move at her visitor's entrance. Helen had made up her mind that Gwendoline must be roused, even against her own will.

‘How dark it is here!’ she exclaimed. ‘Let us have a little air and light. It is so lovely outside.’

‘No, no!’ said Gwendoline, in the harsh

hoarse tone which was all the voice grief had left her. 'Don't draw up the blinds.'

But Helen, feigning not to hear, had already done so, opening the window and letting a flood of brilliant sunlight pour into the room.

'There, that's better!' she exclaimed. 'Now look at these roses. Aren't they sweet?'

Gwendoline hid her face in the counterpane like a wayward child.

'Put down the blinds again,' she muttered.

'Oh no, please not,' said Helen, 'the dark close room makes my head ache so.'

Gwendoline gave an impatient movement of her shoulders, but said no more, and Helen, sitting down beside her, proceeded to talk about everything she could think of, never pausing for an answer, which indeed

would have been useless, but rattling on from one subject to another with most amazing velocity. She could feel that Gwendoline was listening, and presently she was surprised to hear her ask,

‘Where is Dick Vernon?’

Helen’s ready tongue stopped short.

‘He is—going for a tour in America and Australia,’ she answered slowly.

Gwendoline raised her head and regarded her visitor with bloodshot weary eyes.

‘Going, or gone, did you say?’ she asked.

‘Going. He’s accepted an engagement with the Leslie Company,’ said Helen; ‘a very good one, so I was told.’

‘Who told you?’

‘My husband.’

‘Not Dick himself?’

‘No. I have been here so much I’ve had no time to see people.’

Gwendoline dropped her head again. She wondered that she felt no emotion at the news of Vernon’s departure. Her heart had not given one bound, her pulse had not beat one whit faster. Her love must be dead then—had she buried it with Prue? Well, so much the better—she wanted nothing that could remind her of the old time.

‘You have been very good to me,’ she said after awhile, looking up at Helen, who congratulated herself on the effect that her prescription of fresh air and sunlight was having.

‘I have liked to come,’ she answered, bending forward to kiss the hot brow, over which the black hair fell in untidy, tumbled masses.

‘Yes, you’ve been very good. You are good, like your husband—although I once thought——’

‘What did you think?’ asked Helen gently, as Gwendoline paused.

‘I did think at one time that you were not good, and I hated you. Never mind why, but I did. Some day, perhaps, I’ll tell you.’

Helen wondered what she could have done to offend the actress, whom she had known only so slightly until a few weeks ago. She would not force her confidence, however, but contented herself with putting out her hand and caressingly smoothing the tangled locks.

‘Have you been in there?’ suddenly asked Gwendoline, nodding in the direction of the little room which led out of hers.

‘No,’ said Helen. ‘Was it——?’

‘Hers,’ answered Gwendoline. ‘And no one has been in it since. I tried to go in this morning, but I couldn’t, and yet some one must. Will *you*?’

‘Yes, indeed I will, dear,’ said Helen. ‘Would you like me to go now?’

‘Yes, put her things away, I don’t want anybody to touch them—and I couldn’t—yet.’

Helen opened the door and passed in, closing it behind her.

No one had entered since the evening that Prue had dressed to go out. The bed had already been turned down and everything arranged for the night, and Eliza had not gone upstairs from the time Prue had left the house until her mistress had returned, bearing the dying girl in her arms.

Helen looked round. Everything in that little sanctuary testified to the place that

the deformed girl had occupied in Gwendoline's heart. From her earliest childhood nothing had ever been too good for Prue. Little by little the actress had brought together the prettiest, the daintiest furniture in the world, all made specially with regard to the low stature in which, alas ! no improvement was to be expected. Dressing-table, washhand - stand, chest of drawers, writing-table, all were several inches lower than the usual height. The little white bed looked like a child's, but the books on the table beside it clearly showed that no infant mind had occupied the room. Helen gave a sad smile as she took them up, one after another, to replace them in the dwarf-bookcase.

‘Poor girl!’ she thought, ‘what reading for her ! One cannot wonder at her precocious ideas when one sees these.’

The books arranged, she turned towards the dressing-table. Opening the drawer, she tenderly put away ivory brushes, combs, and all the fantastic little nick-nacks that the dead girl had collected. Prue had been extremely fastidious in her ways, everything, although covered now with dust, bore witness to that fact.

‘And now the writing-table. Poor little woman, I don’t suppose she ever used that much!’

Whether she had used it or not, it was furnished with very pretty writing materials in oxidized silver. In frames to match stood two photographs, one on each side of the inkstand. One represented Gwendoline, the other Vernon.

A thrill ran through Helen as she caught sight of the latter. She took it up and looked at it. It was evidently an old one,

taken before she had known him, for he wore a moustache instead of being clean-shaven, and looked a good deal younger than he did now.

How strange of the child to have his photograph, next to her sister's, too, as if those were the only two people worthy of lying on her table, instead of being relegated to the album downstairs! Helen remembered how Prue had spoken of Vernon that afternoon when she had taken her into the garden to see the chickens. Could there ever have been anything between Gwendoline and Vernon, she wondered. But the next instant she recollected the terms in which Vernon had always mentioned Gwendoline. He was not the man to speak so of a woman he had ever loved. He had been very kind and good to both sisters—to whom was he not kind and good?—but

nothing further. She remembered with a pang of shame that she had felt jealous that afternoon, that she had refused to let Vernon come in the carriage with her, not—faithless wife that she had been—because there was danger for her, not because James Fellowes's wife was careful of his honour, but simply because she was angry that her lover should appear to take the least pleasure in another woman's society.

She ran through the blotting-book to see if there were any papers in it that ought to be kept. There seemed to be nothing in it at all, however, and the cleanliness of the blotting-paper showed that Prue's literary efforts had not been many. In the last page, however, she found a torn piece of paper, covered with writing. She took it up and looked at it. What queer writing! Why, it was printing—and—

where had she seen letters like these before ?

In another moment she knew—she understood. It was Prue who had written the anonymous letter to her husband. It was to post it that she had ventured out alone at night. She had paid for it with her life—and to what purpose ? What could have been the motive for such an action ?

Helen knew Prue had not liked her. She was too sensitive not to have felt that, and indeed Prue had not taken much pains to conceal her antipathy. But between disliking a person and writing anonymous letters to injure him there is a very long way, and Helen could not understand it. She sat down before the little table and tried to think of a plausible explanation. The conclusion she came to at last was that poor Prue, with her disordered imagination,

and her mind full of queer literature, had been in love with Vernon, had noticed his attachment to her, Helen, and had taken this singular method of revenge.

‘Unhappy, foolish child!’ she thought. ‘Fate was cruel to her all along!’

She resolved to keep her discovery a secret from Miss Maltravers; the disclosure could do no good; it was better that Gwendoline should be unable to understand why Prue had left the house on that fatal night, than that she should know the real reason. So Helen put the scrap of paper in her purse, finished her work, and returned to Gwendoline.

She found the actress standing up, doing her hair before the glass. She looked frightfully thin and ill, but life had come back into her eyes, and her head poised itself once more with something of its old

grace. Helen saw that the worst was over, the first bitterness of the blow had passed, she need fear no longer, as she had, for her friend's brain.

When they were at dessert that evening Helen drew out the piece of paper and handed it to her husband without a word. He looked curiously at it.

‘Why, it’s the facsimile of the other one!’ he cried; ‘where on earth did you find it?’

‘In Prue’s blotting-book,’ replied Helen; and then she told him how she had come upon it, and what she thought about it.

But Fellowes shook his head.

‘It wasn’t Prue who was in love,’ he said. ‘It’s a very old story, my dear; Miss Maltravers loved Vernon. Everybody knew all about that, ages ago. The poor

child wanted to — secure Vernon for her sister.'

There was silence for a minute. Then Helen said softly,

'Poor little girl. She did what she could !'





CHAPTER XL

TRIUMPH

A REAL London fog was hanging over the whole of the town. It had the streets nearly to itself, having frightened indoors all those whom stern necessity did not compel to brave its choking vapours. Most people, rendered philosophic by custom, had drawn down their blinds, lighted their gas or their lamps, and resigned themselves to begin their evening at ten o'clock in the morning.

A dismal half-darkness reigned in the

dining-room of a certain flat in Queen Anne's Gate. The table was laid for breakfast. Two cups and saucers, two plates, all of the daintiest china possible, awaited the master and mistress; the cloth was decorated with hot-house flowers, the silver was dazzlingly bright, and even in the dim light gave out a cheerful sparkle, catching the reflection of the leaping dancing flames in the grate.

As the brass clock on the chimney-piece struck ten, a girl opened the door and came quickly into the room. With an exclamation of dismay she hastily rang the bell, and, when a trim maid appeared, said,

‘Quick, Bennett, bring the lamp. You ought to have known that we couldn’t breakfast like this.’

Bennett tossed her head and went away,

closing the door behind her with something very like a bang.

The girl sat down in one of the huge armchairs which flanked the fireplace, and began stirring the coals into a yet brighter blaze.

It was just two months since George had succeeded in over-ruling Dorothy Wyvern's conscientious scruples, which had made her hesitate to run directly counter to her aunt's commands. He had at first attempted to persuade her to keep her engagement a secret from Lady Pontifex, urging her to shield him from the humiliation of an ignominious refusal and dismissal; he had employed all his eloquence, all his powers; he had appealed to her affection, to her obedience — but all in vain. Dorothy stood firm. She would not give George up, she would not desert him, but she

would not act treacherously towards her aunt.

So George had to give a reluctant consent, and one morning Dolly, with a beating heart, asked Lady Pontifex if she might speak to her alone.

‘I wonder what the little idiot wants now,’ thought the old lady as she watched the drooping face and figure before her. ‘Some new fad, I suppose. Shouldn’t be surprised if she asked leave to become a pew-opener at that favourite church of hers!’

‘If you please, aunt Mary,’ began Dorothy, feeling dreadfully frightened, ‘if you please, I want to tell you something.’

‘Well, my dear, I am all attention.’

‘I—I—I am going to be married,’ faltered Dorothy.

Lady Pontifex started violently.

Dorothy had really succeeded in surprising her.

‘Dear me!’ she gasped, getting very red in the face. ‘You are going to be married!’

‘Yes,’ murmured Dorothy.

‘Might one inquire to whom?’ asked Lady Pontifex, mentally running over all the eligible young men of her acquaintance, among whom, it is needless to say, George did not figure.

Dorothy hung her head still lower.

‘To—to—Mr. L’Estrange,’ she said almost inaudibly.

This time Lady Pontifex started as if a cannon ball had struck her.

‘What — what — did you say?’ she stammered.

‘To Mr. L’Estrange,’ repeated Dorothy more boldly.

Lady Pontifex got up, and came over to where Dorothy was sitting. She put her hand on the girl's arm, and looked searchingly into her face.

‘My dear, do you know what you are saying?’ she asked almost solemnly.

Dorothy rose too and returned her aunt's gaze bravely.

‘Yes, aunt Mary, I do know. I love him,’ she answered earnestly.

Lady Pontifex took away her hand as if Dorothy's arm burned her.

‘You—*love*—him?’ she repeated with a curling lip. ‘*Love* that adventurer, that mountebank who lives by his wits, who has not a farthing in the world, whose very name is not his own——’

‘Stop, aunt Mary!’ cried Dorothy indignantly, ‘you have no right to say such

things. What proof have you that his name is not his own ?'

'Oh, I daresay it's as much his as anything that one steals or picks up is one's own,' returned Lady Pontifex, 'but he's no L'Estrange. Silly girls may be taken in by him and his Huguenot-refugee story, but not an old woman of the world like myself.'

'You have no right——' began Dorothy again, but Lady Pontifex stopped her.

'Let us sit down and talk this thing over quietly,' she said. 'I suppose your lover has not forbidden you to listen to me ?'

With her loyalty to George strengthening at every word of opposition, Dorothy sat down and folded her hands tightly together.

'You are my only sister's child,' said Lady Pontifex gravely, 'and you have been

under my care ever since you were little more than a baby. I know that you have never cared much for me, and that you have always longed to leave me. Still, for your mother's sake you must listen to me, and I will do what I can to save you from a fate I know she would have shuddered at. Yes, Dorothy, you may sneer, and think I am using big words, but that is the truth. You, a lady by birth and education, who have never seen anything of the world but its sunshiny side, do not know what you are talking about when you propose to marry a man like Mr. L'Estrange, a man who is not even a gentleman, who is utterly without resources of any kind.'

'George is a gentleman,' said Dorothy, holding her head high, 'and he has his brains. Besides, I have enough for both of us.'

‘Quite so, as no doubt he very well knows,’ observed Lady Pontifex dryly.

‘He isn’t mercenary!’ cried Dorothy. ‘He told me he would have married me if I hadn’t had a penny.’

‘Very generous of him!’ sneered Lady Pontifex.

A great deal more was said on both sides, Lady Pontifex alternately pleading, scolding, entreating, Dorothy insisting, defending, recriminating, until it almost ended in a quarrel. Lady Pontifex was genuinely distressed. She could not reconcile herself to the thought of her niece’s marrying an actor, a man only tolerated in society by reason of the fashion of the moment. She liked George well enough personally, but had never looked upon him as an equal, and now she was asked to accept him as a nephew. The interview

concluded by her absolutely refusing her consent to the marriage, and ordering Dorothy to break off all communication with Mr. L'Estrange at once, a command which Dorothy politely but distinctly declined to obey.

‘I should have liked your consent, aunt Mary,’ she said sadly, ‘but if you won’t give it, I must do without it. I cannot give him up.’

‘You are a heartless girl!’ returned Lady Pontifex, and never mentioned Mr. L'Estrange’s name again.

After appealing to various people, and taking counsel of her lawyer, Lady Pontifex came to understand that she must submit to the inevitable. Dorothy had evidently made up her mind, she was her own mistress, no one could prevent her from ruining herself if she chose to do so.

Countenance the marriage, however, Lady Pontifex would not; if her niece married an actor, an adventurer, she must arrange matters for herself. So Lady Pontifex pretended not to know that Dorothy was getting her trousseau, although she could not prevent her maid from chattering to her about Miss Wyvern's 'lovely things, my lady'; she affected to be absolutely indifferent as to the date of her niece's approaching wedding, and even when Dorothy, on the very last morning came, dressed all in white, into her room, and tearfully implored her not to let her go in anger, she only half-relented.

'You are a fool, my dear, and you will find it out presently,' she said severely. 'However, wilful girls must have their own way. You look very nice. Who made your gown?'

And with this unsentimental farewell Dorothy was obliged to be content.

Mrs. Fellowes had done all she could for Dorothy, and after her marriage she again came forward and helped to smooth matters between Mrs. L'Estrange and her aunt. Lady Pontifex, who in reality loved her niece better than she knew, allowed herself, after a while, to yield to Helen's diplomatic arts, and received the delinquent back into some semblance of favour.

‘She will want her friends presently, no doubt,’ she observed to Helen. ‘He is certain to show the cloven hoof sooner or later. Only imagine, he calls her Dolly, and she likes it! And she goes to the theatre, my saintly Dorothy, who used to think even a Punch and Judy show rather impious, and considered it wicked to go to a circus! How he got such power over her I don't

know, but she thinks the whole world of him. Dolly, indeed!—he has turned her into a complete doll!’

‘He seems very fond of her,’ said Helen.

‘And so he might be!’ answered the old lady. ‘She brought him money enough. No, when I think of Forest Langley, that grand old house, in the hands of George L’Estrange, actor and dramatic author, humbug and charlatan, sprung from goodness knows where, it almost makes me cry. I wonder the poor old Inquisitor doesn’t turn in his grave!’

‘But Mr. L’Estrange has retired from the stage, and after all his is a good old name,’ observed Helen demurely.

Lady Pontifex looked at her sharply.

‘Don’t tell me!’ she snarled. ‘Dorothy, or, I beg her pardon, *Dolly*, may be a fool, but I’m not.’

And although she had consented to receive George, she never relaxed from a dignified demeanour, intended to convey to him the information that she did not look upon him as one of her family, and that she only tolerated him for her niece's sake.

Dorothy was thinking of her aunt this morning as she stirred the fire, and waited for the lamp to dispel the gloom. She wished that Lady Pontifex would show a little more cordiality towards George, that she would not give him the tips of her fingers in such an unmistakably hostile manner. If she could only forget her prejudices, and could see George as he really was! The two-months-old wife was not in the least disillusioned; she loved her husband as fondly as ever, his influence over her had become entire. She had merged her identity in his, he was her conscience now, she referred

everything to him. Dear George! How clever he was, how brilliant! To-night his play was to be brought out at the Thespis. It would be a grand success, she felt sure.

The maid came in with the lamp, which she placed in the middle of the table. Then she turned to Dorothy with a half-defiant, half-apologetic air.

‘Oh, if you please, ma’am, I wish to leave in a month’s time.’

Dorothy looked up surprised.

‘You wish to leave? Why, Bennett, I hoped you were quite comfortable with us. Have you anything to complain of?’

Bennett fidgeted with her apron.

‘No, ma’am, nothing special, only I’ve always given satisfaction, but Mr. L’Estrange is such a very particular gentleman, there don’t seem no pleasing him.’

‘Oh, very well,’ said Dorothy coldly, and Bennett left the room.

In another minute George came in. He had shaved his whiskers, and now wore only a moustache, which much improved his appearance. He was attired in the freshest of linen and the most comfortable of tweed suits. He walked over to the window, and stood gazing out at the fog.

‘Can’t see an inch before one’s nose!’ he said testily. ‘This confounded fog will spoil everything!’

‘Oh, George!’ exclaimed Dorothy.

‘Well?’

‘You said confounded,’ she murmured.

‘Well? You don’t want me to say blessed, do you?’

‘You know I don’t like you to swear, darling.’

George made a grimace, unseen by

Dorothy, who was pouring out the coffee, Bennett having just brought in breakfast.

‘Do you know, George,’ Dorothy said presently, after George had grumbled at his coffee and looked critically at his devilled kidney, ‘Bennett gave me notice just now.’

‘Did she? Let her go, then. And I tell you what, Dolly. These parlour-maids are all nonsense. None of them know anything about their business. We shall never be comfortable until we have a man.’

‘Very well, dear,’ said Dorothy meekly.

‘Did she give any reason for leaving?’

‘She said you were too particular,’ said Dorothy.

George laughed scornfully.

‘I wonder what kind of household she has been accustomed to!’ he observed. ‘If she thinks *me* particular, what would she

have said to my father, by Jove ! He was a fastidious old gentleman, and no mistake.'

'Still you are rather hard on Bennett sometimes,' said Dorothy.

'Bennett is a very bad servant. My mother wouldn't have had her a week. Lady Pontifex recommended her to you, didn't she? By the way, is she coming with us to-night?'

'No, she told me she had promised to go with Mrs. Fellowes.'

'Oh ! Well, it's just as comfortable so. I shall be awfully nervous, and she would have chattered all the time. She wasn't over-amiable last night, was she?'

'Not very,' replied Dorothy rather sadly. 'I don't think she'll ever quite forgive me.'

George laughed.

'She could hardly expect you to remain a poor little spinster for your whole life,

just for the sake of leaving her your income, could she ?’

‘ Oh, George !’ said Dorothy, distressed, ‘ I’m sure it wasn’t for that. I’m sure aunt Mary never cared for money.’

‘ No,’ answered George bitterly. ‘ I suppose it was because I was a poor actor, though, if it comes to that, my family and Lady Pontifex’s can well bear comparison. Why, are you aware, Dorothy, that Lady Pontifex’s great-grandfather was a jeweller ?’

‘ Really ?’ asked Dorothy, awestricken.

‘ Really. I shouldn’t wonder if he’d been a pawnbroker as well. Not that I care about such things,’ he added loftily, ‘ I consider pride of birth and station the refuge of the vulgar.’

‘ Of course, dearest,’ replied Dorothy.

‘ If this fog doesn’t clear off by the evening,’ observed Mr. L’Estrange presently, ‘ the house will be empty.’

‘Oh, it’s sure to!’ said Dorothy consolingly. ‘I think it is lifting a little already.’

They left the dining-room, and passed into the drawing-room, a large and handsome room, furnished as luxuriously as, and rather more tastefully than, the one in Cavendish Square which George had thought so gorgeous a few months back. As he passed the grand Broadwood piano George took out his handkerchief and flicked some dust off its polished surface, casting a loving look at it as he did so.

‘What a dear little nest we have, my pet,’ he said, taking up his stand before the fire, and looking appreciatively round the warm, flower-scented room.

‘Yes, indeed, darling, and when I think how little I deserve such happiness, I——’

‘Oh yes, we know all about that, Dolly.

Come and look at the programme for to-night.'

George was in a state of high nervousness. Well off now in a worldly sense, he was no less ambitious than before. His material necessities were provided for, but his soul hungered and thirsted after literary fame and power as greedily as ever. He had no intention of resting on his oars, of taking his ease, while his wife's money paved his way with roses. Up, up, he meant to climb, until the acclamations of the world should crown his genius. If Dorothy chose to climb with him well and good, if she failed, if she preferred to return to her old Puritan ways of thinking, it mattered not to him. She had crossed his path, he had utilised his chance, but she must take care of herself now. To-night London's verdict would be given—in his favour, he felt sure, to-morrow George

L'Estrange's name would be in every one's mouth.

It was a disappointment that Miss Maltravers was not going to play the heroine's part in *Damon and Pythias*. Miss St. Vincent was to take it instead, and she was neither so good-looking nor so clever an actress as Gwendoline. Still, she had done very well at rehearsals, and it could not be helped. He had been genuinely grieved to hear of poor Prue's death; there had been a great bond of sympathy between himself and the whimsical little hunchback, whose every word was flavoured with a sharpness and acidity most agreeable to his palate. He had not been able to discover why she had left her home that evening, and only guessed that it might have had something to do with her scheme of revenge against Mrs. Fellowes. He himself had not for-

gotten his grudge against Helen. She would always have a bitter enemy in George L'Estrange, and she knew it, although they had met many times since his marriage, and were seemingly on excellent terms.

Vernon's disappearance from the scene had made him suspect that Prue had perhaps written to Helen's husband, but he never learned anything for certain, and although he purposely introduced Vernon's name into the conversation when both Helen and her husband were present, he could not detect the slightest trace of embarrassment on Helen's countenance, nor the least shade of angry remembrance in James Fellowes's eyes. But he had been too much occupied with his own affairs, after all, to give very much attention to anything else. His play filled his whole mind now, he thought of it

by day and dreamed of it at night; the time of its production had seemed to his impatient fancy as if it would never come, and now, when at last the slow hours had moved past, his nerves were in a state of over-excitement absolutely painful.

Towards five o'clock, to his intense delight, the fog began to lift, and when it was time to start for the theatre the atmosphere was perfectly clear, a phenomenon which he straightway accepted as a good omen.

Arrived at the Thespis, he deposited his wife in a box and went behind the scenes. He had retired from the stage on which he had hardly stepped, as he considered that it would be a useless waste of himself, and derogatory to his dignity, to continue working his way up as an actor. He meant his pen to be the instrument of his fame, and was only too thankful to escape from the

monotonous work of small parts such as he had played at the Thespis in the spring. Dorothy was very glad that he had, as she imagined, sacrificed his histrionic career for her sake ; although her love had greatly modified her ideas so far as to make her convinced that a dramatic author's calling was a noble one, she preferred that others should act what her husband wrote.

First nights at the Thespis were always well attended, and this one was no exception to the rule. The house was crowded ; the critics were there in full array, with a good many actors and actresses, literary people, and artists. What a different interest George took in the proceedings from that first night on which he had been privileged to peep through the traditional hole in the curtain ! He looked through the same hole now, but everything

seemed changed. The house looked much more brilliant, the audience much gayer and more impatient. Just for a moment the thought of failure came into his head, turning him sick and giddy. What a downfall that would be! He had raised his hopes so high, if they were dashed he felt that he could never hold up his head again. But the next instant he smiled. Fellowes had guaranteed his success, and Fellowes knew what he was about. He left the curtain and went round to his own box, where he sat down, hiding himself behind his wife, and looking often at his watch to make sure that the minutes were really moving.

Down in the stalls two becollared youths were talking.

‘What’s become of the Maltravers, do you know?’ the one asked of the other.

‘Oh, I heard that her mother, or aunt, or

somebody like that, don't you know, had died, and that the fair Gwendoline, being inconsolable, had retired from the stage for a bit.'

'Beastly bore, isn't it? I say, who's this L'Estrange?'

'L'Estrange? who d'ye mean?'

'Why the author of course. Haven't you spotted the name on your programme?'

'Oh, ah, to be sure! Don't know him. Some new fellah, I suppose.'

'Rather pretty young woman up in that box. There, to the right.'

The rather pretty young woman was Dorothy. She was dressed in white, and was certainly looking her best. Some subtle change had come over her face since her marriage.

The look of nun-like simplicity which had been its chief characteristic had faded

out of it, leaving a less spiritual, but far more animated expression. The heavy lids were not so often lowered over the brown eyes, the pathetic droop at the corners of the mouth had quite vanished. She held her head more erect, and a slight suggestion of womanly vanity was visible in the little fluffy curls that clustered round her forehead, where in olden times the two Madonna-like bands had been wont to lie so smoothly.

They had driven down to the theatre in their brougham, for they had both a brougham and a victoria, luxuries to which George had taken, with all the rest, as a duck takes to water. He wondered sometimes now how he had ever existed without them.

He was looking very well too this evening; dressed with scrupulous care in a

suit that was certainly not that first one of mediocre cut and fit to which Lucy Mellon had helped him ; his studs could stand the very closest inspection, and together with his seal ring, which bore the L'Estrange crest and motto, were in the best taste. He too had changed. He wore a look of dignity and composure that had been foreign to the features of George Collins junior, of the Bell and Boot.

Presently Mrs. Fellowes and Lady Pontifex appeared in a box opposite Dorothy's, they exchanged nods and smiles, and George went round to speak to them. Lady Pontifex received him with her usual coolness, but, taking pity on his excitement, forbore to snub him as severely as she generally did.

George went back to his place, and the curtain rose at last. Helen began by

listening as well as looking, but soon her thoughts wandered. How well she knew every word of this first act! She recognised her own touches, her own corrections, and remembered the hours that George had spent reading and talking about the play in Cavendish Square. Those days seemed very far away now — she had lived through so much since then. George's own folly with regard to herself had faded into a very distant background, she could meet him now without the slightest self-consciousness. She had become much better friends with her husband of late, they had drawn closer together than ever before; she appreciated his loyalty and goodness, as it had been impossible for her to do in the days when her thoughts had been taken up with other things, which now she had resolutely put away from her. She was not unhappy; she

found she could do her duty without breaking her heart, and as week after week went by her soul grew more peaceful and serene in that certainty of self-conquest which brings to one the very best kind of strength.

Clap! Clap! Clap! The end of the first act.

‘It’s excellent! I must say, although I would far rather not, that it’s really very good—very clever!’ said Lady Pontifex. ‘After all, it’s better to have a nephew-in-law who can make you laugh, if you must have one at all, than a curate with charities and Sunday-schools on his mind, and that’s what I was always afraid of.’

‘Here’s Jim,’ said Helen, as Mr. Fellowes came into the box.

‘It’s going all right, isn’t it?’ said the manager with a satisfied nod. ‘Wait

till the third act, though, if that doesn't bring the house down I shall be surprised.'

'I only wish poor Gwendoline could have taken her part,' said Helen. 'Miss St. Vincent is very good, but she can't act like Gwendoline.'

'Not by a long way,' assented Mr. Fellowes, 'but never mind. We shall have her back very soon now, I feel certain. She sent me a note this morning asking me to let her have news of to-night's doings, which at least shows that her interest in the old house is reviving.'

'Yes, poor thing,' said Helen.

The second act went as well as the first. As the plot broadened and developed there was dead silence in the house, the breathless hush of intense interest. George sitting back in his box, could hear his heart beat, and was quivering from head to foot.

Dorothy shed copious tears at the pathetic parts, and even Lady Pontifex hastily brushed away a tell-tale drop from her rubicund cheek.

As the curtain fell slowly at the end of the third act, such a storm of enthusiastic applause arose as even the walls of the Thespis had never heard before. Dorothy shrank back and fairly sobbed with pride and excitement. Then loud cries of 'Author! Author!' arose, and, amid the plaudits that rang from stalls to gallery, George L'Estrange, pale to the lips, but with the light of triumph in his eyes, stepped to the front of the box and bowed.

THE END







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